A Secret's Worth

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/20486987.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
Gen

Fandoms:
Tales of Arcadia (Cartoons), Trollhunters - Daniel Kraus & Guillermo del Toro

Relationships:
Toby Domzalski & Jim Lake Jr., Barbara Lake & Jim Lake Jr., Claire Nuñez & Darci Scott & Mary Wang, Jim Lake Jr. & Toby Domzalski & Claire Nuñez & Darci Scott & Mary Wang

Characters:
Jim Lake Jr. (Tales of Arcadia), Toby Domzalski, Claire Nuñez, Mary Wang, Darci Scott, Barbara Lake, Walter Strickler | Stricklander, Detective Scott (Tales of Arcadia), Nancy "Nana" Domzalski, Jim Lake Sr. (Tales of Arcadia)

Additional Tags:
Drama, Suspense, Slow Burn, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Secrets, Mystery, No trolls or trollhunting in this one but we'll get there eventually, Developing Friendships, Family Drama, teenage antics, Investigations, Troll Jim reveal, Revelations, Discoveries, Unintended Consequences

Language:
English

Series:
Part 2 of Sunshine through the Clouds

Stats:
Published: 2019-09-27 Completed: 2023-12-23 Words: 165,219 Chapters: 38/38

A Secret's Worth

by rosemaidenvixen

Summary

High school is a time for learning, exploration, making new friends. At Arcadia Oaks High school, five freshman come together to do just that, but it soon becomes apparent that all is not well for one of them. And he's just as desperate to keep his secrets as his friends are to uncover them. But more is going on than any of them can imagine, and when the full truth comes out, no one will be prepared.

Claire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The building itself was utterly unremarkable, a boxy structure of beige bricks and plexiglass windows. But to Claire this building was a huge first step.

Claire walked up to the front door and pushed her way inside, other students milled around in the large corridor, occasionally opening or shutting the blue lockers that lined every side of it. Claire headed in, navigating her way through the crowd while taking in more of her surroundings. The walls and lockers had a slightly worn look and the air smelled faintly of sweat and rubber. Despite that Claire couldn't help but smile, feeling lighter with every step.

High school, not the snooty prep school her mom kept pushing her to consider; real actual high school.

Claire broke free of the crowded hallway and into an outdoor area full of concrete picnic tables. She glanced around until she spotted the table Mary and Darci were at and jogged over to meet them.

Mary noticed her approaching and waved "Claire-Bear! Over here!"

Claire slowed to a stop and slid into her seat "It's great to see you guys, you have no idea how excited I am now that we're starting high school together,"

"I know!" Darci gushed "I can't wait to try out for the cheerleading squad,"

Claire snorted “I still think you’re nuts for not going for theatre club,”

“What can I say? The pom poms are calling me,”

“Both of you are missing the big picture,” Mary paused for dramatic effect “All the boys that will fall at our feet!”

Claire and Darci groaned in unison. Not this again.

Mary smirked at her friends “Trust me on this,” she brandished her phone in their direction “I have over a thousand followers already, so it’s only a matter of time before I’m the queen bee of this place,” she let out a dreamy sigh “And then admirers will follow,”

Claire didn’t know why she was surprised, the schools and grades they were in might change, but some things never did “Don’t get ahead of yourself Mare, this is just our first day, it doesn’t matter how many followers you have, boys are hardly going to be lining up to--”

“Give it back!”

“Come on, you always make tons of extra,”

“Yeah but that doesn’t mean--”

All three girls turned in the direction of the new voices.

Two boys were heading towards them, a red headed one holding a paper bag, and one in a blue jacket making a grab for the bag that redhead was holding.

They froze upon noticing the girls eyes on them, before quickly jerking into semi-normal postures.

“Uh...Hi?” blue jacket boy said with a nervous smile.

Darci raised an eyebrow at them “Hi?”

Claire turned in her seat to take in the newcomers; redhead was somebody new, but she could have sworn she had seen blue jacket before.

Mary narrowed her eyes in suspicion “Can we help you with something?”

Redhead perked up “Actually yes,” he fended off one more attempt from blue jacket to take the bag and held it out towards Claire “My friend here was baking last night and accidentally made too many, would you mind taking them off our hands?”

Curious and just the slightest bit sceptical, Claire accepted the bag. Mary and Darci leaned over to get a better look as Claire reached inside.

“Are these…”

“Macarons!” Darci squealed.

Mary plucked one of the cookies out of Claire’s hand and held it up for examination “Hang on, you *made* these?”

Blue jacket forced out an awkward chuckle “Yep…sure did,”

That’s when it clicked. Last February. Her mom’s fundraiser at the hospital. What was his name, John? Jake?

“I don’t think we got your names,”

“Oh! I’m Jim,” he gestured to the red head by his side “This is Toby,”

Toby winked at them “The one and only,”

Claire smiled back “Nice to meet you, I’m Claire,”

“I’m Darci,”

“I’m Mary,”

The conversation fell flat as none of them could figure out what to say next.

Claire fiddled with her thumbs “Are you guys freshmen to?”

“Yep,” Toby said with a confident smirk “We’ll probably have a lot of classes together,”

“Having students in the same grade share classes would make a lot of sense,” Darci said with just a hint of sarcasm, although judging by the grin on her face she was more amused than anything else

“Well, it was nice meeting you guys, but Toby and I have to…get to our lockers, so…I guess I’ll see you later,”

Claire brushed a few loose strands of hair out of her face “I would like that,”

Toby took it in stride but Jim was blushing so hard he looked like a tomato. He stuttered out his own goodbye before making a hasty retreat with Toby in tow.

Claire turned back around in her seat only to come face to face with a very smug looking Mary.

“What?”

Mary gave her a knowing grin that would have been more fitting on a feline “Didn’t someone just say something about not getting ahead of ourselves?”

A blush burned to life across Claire’s cheeks “It’s not like that! They just seemed nice,”

Mary waved a cookie under Claire's nose "And the macarons?"

"You heard what he said, Jim just made extra and they were sharing them,"

Darci popped one of the aforementioned macarons into her mouth "So that's why you were giving him goo goo eyes the whole time," she mumbled through a mouthful of crumbs "Just the cookies?"

Claire fixed Darci with a level stare as she finished chewing the cookie, an oh-so-innocent look on her face, Mary snickered from across the table. All Claire wanted was to talk to people in her new school,

Preferably dark haired boys that baked macarons and got punch for their moms at parties,

Without her friends reading too much into it. Was that so much to ask?

"Et tu Darci?"

Lockers and brick walls surrounded her on three sides, another dead end. Claire groaned before turning around and heading back the way she came. Seriously, why did this place have to be so huge? This was the third time this week Claire had gotten turned around on her way to the choir room.

The back of someone's shirt looming just inches in front of her face pulled Claire out of her grousing. She stopped in her tracks to avoid a collision. A loose crowd of sorts had gathered, growing thicker as the hallway continued on, a low buzz of whispering and hushed conversation rippled through them.

Mary and Darci were standing off to the side, Mary was on her tiptoes trying to see through the mass of bodies while Darci just looked anxious. Hoping her friends had some idea of what was happening, Claire walked over to them.

"You guys know what's going on?"

Darci turned upon hearing her voice "Jim Lake started crying in the middle of the hall,"

Hearing that name caused Claire to freeze in her tracks.

Jim Lake, from the fundraiser, macaron boy.

"He was crying? Why?"

"No one knows, one minute he was fine, the next he was sobbing on the floor,"

Mary spoke up for the first time, startling both of them "Which is why we're going to figure out what happened,"

Before she could ask Mary exactly what she meant by that, Señor Uhl's voice started booming from the other side of the crowd; in response, the gathered students started to walk away, a few straight up ran.

Claire was right about to join them, if there was one teacher who's bad side you did *not* want to be on it was Señor Uhl, when Mary grabbed her and Darci's wrists, pulling them down the hall after her as she dashed away.

After numerous twists and turns Mary finally let them go and peeked around the corner of the corridor they were in. Claire glanced around, the halls were clear now, class must have started. She gave her jacket zipper a nervous tug, if she got caught ditching classes in her first week of school her mom would be *pissed*.

Whatever Mary's scheme was Darci was having none of it "Mare, what are you--"

"Shh!" Mary hissed and made frantic shushing motions at them before jerking back and pressing herself against the lockers.

Curious, Claire risked a peek around the corner and saw Toby jogging up from the opposite end of the hall. Gone was the over confident boy they had met on Monday, this Toby looked ashen and postively stricken. He slowed to a stop and went through a door on the wall perpendicular to her, disappearing from her sight.

Less than a second after the door shut behind him Mary ran ahead, Claire and Darci following on her heels. In one fluid motion Mary slid to her knees and pressed her ear against the door. Dacri hung back, restlessly glancing back and forth down either side of the hall. Claire recognized this room, this was the front office, she'd been in here a bunch of times while she was getting registered.

It was only then that she noticed the sound of voices coming from inside.

“Do you have any idea why James-- Jim, was so out of sorts?”

That was Mr. Strickler, their history teacher. He was talking about Jim. The desire to snoop overriding every ounce of common sense in her body, Claire moved next to Mary and pressed her own ear against the door. Darci muttered something about how her dad was going to ground her until she was thirty before joining them.

“I know you’re worried about Jim, but if he needs help, any information you can give would be greatly appreciated, and I promise, nothing you say will leave this room,”

Claire’s hands were trembling against the wood of the door, her pulse pounded in her ears like a drum. She shouldn’t be listening to this. She should not be listening right now.

Toby’s voice rang out next, sending Claire’s heart straight up into her throat “It’s just that...today’s his birthday…which was also the day his dad walked out...ten years ago,”

Claire had to cover her mouth to keep from gasping.

She had a feeling that she just learned something she had *no* business knowing.

Strickler was saying something else now but Claire didn’t hear.

No wonder Jim had started crying.

Claire was yanked back to reality by Mary and Darci pulling her away from the door. It was just in time to, no sooner did they sprint back around the corner than Toby came out and started heading in their direction.

The girls froze and pressed their backs against the lockers as hard as they could. Claire held her breath as Toby stepped around the corner and walked right past her. Mercifully, Toby didn't look up, keeping his head slumped down, staring at his shoes as he walked by. Immediately after Toby was far enough past them, they raced into the nearest bathroom for cover.

They stood in silence for a few seconds, the only sound their frantic breathing echoing off the stall doors, while they waited for someone to burst through the door and bust them for eavesdropping. After a few minutes passed, it slowly became apparent that they had gotten away with it.

For better or worse.

Darci spoke up first "That was...wow,"

Claire eyed Mary uncertainly, she knew her friend was a huge fan of gossip, but this... "You won't share this on your blog, right?"

Mary leaned back against the wall and sank to the ground "No," she mumbled "I just thought he didn't get on the football team or something, not...this,"

Claire turned and leaned heavily against the bathroom counter, porcelain cold against her palms. She wasn't naive, she knew that just because she had a mom and a dad didn't mean everyone else did. Some kids had just one, or an uncle, or a grandma, even two moms or dads.

And sometimes...moms or dads weren't good people.

Claire lifted her head to face her reflection. It might not have been her idea to eavesdrop, but she could have stopped Mary, instead she'd gone right along with it. And now they all knew a big fat personal secret that none of them had any right to know.

Needing something to do with her hands, Claire turned on the sink and splashed her face with water. She might have just met Jim, but he seemed really nice, nicer than most of the other boys their age. And now he was going to have to deal with being the kid that started crying in front of everyone.

Claire wanted to do something, anything, to make him feel better. About his dad and for what just happened. But if she tried to reach out and cheer him up he'd probably just think it was out of pity.

Not to mention that she could *never* let it slip that they knew about his dad.

Her hands went limp under the streaming faucet. How could she reach out without seeming insincere?

Chapter End Notes

> It's been a while but the sequel to You are my Sunshine is here. I won't be getting to trolls or Trollhunting in this instalment, but

Toby and others will find out about Jim's troll form and how/why the bath bomb of doom came to be will be revealed.

I have time to write, but I'm working on multiple projects to keep from becoming burned out on any one thing. Between that and my med tech program, unfortunately I can't stick to any strict update schedule. While I can't promies anything, I going to try to get an update published every few weeks or at least one a month.

Jim

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim stood at the entrance to Arcadia Oaks high school, feet rooted to the ground. He *really* didn't want to go inside.

After sobbing in the car for no less than a solid hour last Thursday he and his mom had gone home to spend the rest of the day crying off and on and fighting back abject misery. Next morning things weren't much better, Jim had stood at the front door for nearly twenty minutes, lunch and book bag in hand, trying to find the will to force himself to go outside and bike to school. In the end his mom had found him like that and called him out sick again. Jim ended up spending Friday hanging out in the staff lounge at the clinic visiting with his mom on her breaks.

The entire time he had avoided Toby and only communicated with him through vague texts, dreading giving him an actual explanation for all of this.

On Saturday Toby had forced the issue and showed up at his house in person. He hadn't said anything, just held up a DVD of the Great British Baking show in one hand and an extra gande size bag of tacos in the other.

If he hadn't been completely emotionally wrung out by that point Jim would have cried.

One weekend later that brought him here, Monday morning, getting ready to go in and face the social fallout of bursting into tears in the middle of the school. Jim wasn't so naive as to think that there wouldn't be any. And to add a cherry on top of the disaster sundae

that today was sure to be, Toby had to go to the orthodontist and wouldn't get here until lunch. Meaning Jim was going to be facing the tender mercies of his peers alone.

His gut twisted, if things were hard at school before, they were about to get even harder.

But no matter how bad this was going to be, no matter how much crap Steve and every other jerk in school was going to give him; going to in and facing the music, even without Toby's support, was better than spending a long day alone in his house.

Anything was better than that.

Sucking in a final deep breath, Jim steeled himself and walked inside.

Mercifully, he didn't run into any trouble getting to his locker and making his way through the halls. But Jim knew better than to let that get his hopes up. Resisting the urge to hightail it to the other side of town, or preferably even further than that, Jim walked up to first period algebra and pushed the door open.

Ms. Janeth wasn't here yet, but more than half of the students already were. Sitting and standing around talking while they waited for class to start. The creak of the door opening caused the buzz of conversation to dim and several people to turn and stare in his direction. Which was perfectly normal, that's just what people did when someone came into the room, they weren't staring at him in particular. Although some of them held their gazes long enough to make him start doubting that.

Jim made his way to his desk in silence. Just when he was about to sit down, someone's palm made contact with the back of his head, and

not gently.

He spun around on reflex, only to come face to face with his absolute least favorite person in the world.

“I’m surprised that you’re willing to show your face around here again *Lake* ,” Steve said with a nasty smirk “We don’t usually let crybabies come to the big kid school, but if you really want to stick around, I’m sure we can find some diapers for you,”

Jim glowered, cheeks burning, but said nothing as he slid into his desk. From all around him came snickering and whispers of ‘Crybaby Lake’.

Less than half an hour in and things were already going to hell. Great, just great.

Fortunately Ms. Janeth came in less than a minute later, putting an end to the murmurs and giggles. Class was relatively normal, Ms. Janeth lecturing on algebra and working through problems while Jim tried to force himself to pay attention.

Even though he wasn’t going to make anything of himself after high school so there was no damn point to studying algebra so what was the point of even trying anymore.

An hour of algebra later the bell rang, signalling for everyone to pack up and head to the next class. Jim had stuffed his papers into his bag and stood up out of his desk when Ms. Janeth stepped over to him.

“Jim, could I have a word with you?”

He froze, a teacher had never approached him like this before, meaning that this was no doubt a direct result of his public meltdown last week “Uh...ok,”

She waited until everyone else had left the room, some of his classmates lingering and glancing back at them not so discreetly as they went through the door.

Once they were alone she spoke up against, voice soft “Is everything... alright with you?”

At first Jim wasn’t sure if he heard her correctly. Was he alright? A common, innocent question. One that had him biting the inside of his cheek to keep from screaming.

Alright.

He was on house arrest every night, doomed to become an unemployed recluse after school was over, and one day he would die old, friendless, and alone. Of course that was all assuming no one figured out his secret and shipped him off to be alien autopsied.

Jim was pretty much as goddamn far from *alright* as a person could.

He forced a smile “Yeah I’m good,”

Ms. Janeth frowned, apparently Jim wasn’t very convincing “Well if you ever do have any...issues, I’m here to help,”

Jim mumbled out a thank you before making a hasty retreat and scampering off to his next class.

Health and Spanish class were much of the same; sideways stares and whispers from his classmates, and Coach Lawrence and Señor Uhl pulling him aside afterwards to ask if everything was ok and tell him that they could help or just listen if he ever needed it.

You know you've hit rock bottom when even Señor Uhl takes pity on you.

Finally, after the longest morning of his entire life, lunch period came.

Jim cycled through his breathing exercises as he headed into the cafeteria, stomach growling. He hadn't packed a lunch this morning; just getting up and getting dressed had been utterly draining. Even waiting in line to buy some french fries sounded unbearably exhausting. Guess that meant he was skipping today. Steve had a different lunch period, so at the very least Jim would be able to get a break from him.

So far school was still better than being home alone, but not by much.

He took a seat at an unoccupied cafeteria table and pulled out his phone, hopefully the new Go-go Sushi app could take his mind off of things for a bit. Jim had been at it for about ten minutes and burned through four out of five lives when Toby showed up at his table, catching him completely off guard, over an hour early and carrying a large pizza box.

"I figured Chef Jim could use a break," Toby beamed at him as he set the box down onto the table "So for the next five days, you let me worry about lunch,"

Jim was stunned and more than a little touched “Tobes you--”

“Up up up,” Toby held up a hand “Sorry Jimbo, I’m not taking no for an answer, you’re just going to have to get used to take out a la Toby for the rest of the week,”

Tears brimmed at the edge of Jim’s vision, he blinked rapidly to dispel them before they could fall. Toby had been his rock throughout the entire disaster that was his life, never prying or asking questions, always there with cheerful support and comfort. He was the greatest friend Jim could ever have.

It was going to hurt so *so* much when Toby went to college and left him behind.

“Thanks Tobes,”

Toby took a seat next to him and opened the box “Anytime,”

Jim reached in and grabbed the closest slice, Toby following suit. It wasn’t until he took the first bite that he realized just how hungry he was.

They’d been chewing their wonderfully greasy pizza in silence for a few minutes when Jim saw someone approach their table from the corner of his eye. Of course, today just had to be one of those days when Seamus decided to bother them without Steve acting as the muscle. He swallowed his mouthful of pizza and snapped his head up to tell Seamus to get lost only to freeze.

A girl with blue streaked dark hair stood in front of him.

It was Claire.

The Claire.

The girl who'd been in his dreams ever since that fundraiser last February.

"Hi," she said with a small smile.

Jim's heart fluttered. Claire was *talking* to him.

"Oh...hi,"

"How are things?"

Jim, fumbled, trying to remember how to put words together "Oh, uh...things are...good...I guess,"

Claire tugged at the edge of her jacket "So me, Mary, and Darci really liked the macarons you shared with us,"

The memory flickered behind his eyes, Toby snatching the cookies he had made the night before and sharing them with Claire and her friends in order to 'make a good first impression'.

Had that only happened a week ago?

“So to say thank you...we were wondering, maybe, if you guys want to go to the county fair with us with us this weekend?”

Jim’s mouth went dry. Of all things he expected to happen his first day back, this was not one of them “The county fair? I, uh….”

“No pressure, think about it for a bit,” she piped up, voice half an octave higher “Let me know what you decide,”

She scurried off, gone just as quickly as she had come.

Jim was still trying to restart his brain when he felt Toby elbow him in the side “ *Oh my gosh!* Claire just totally asked you out!”

“What? No, you heard her, it’s a group thing, you’re invited to,”

“Po-ta-to po-tah-to, I know what it looks like when a girl’s been bitten by the love bug. You’re going to tell her yes, right?”

“I...don’t know,”

An hour later Jim was sitting in history class half listening to Mr. Strickler’s lecture, still turning Claire’s offer over and over in his mind.

A week ago, he would have said yes in a millisecond, but that was

before. Thoughts of Claire still made him blush, but what could she possibly see in him? Claire had to know about Jim's breakdown, why would she want anything to do with him? She'd said that it was a thank you to him and Toby for the macarons. But macrons wouldn't outweigh a public crying fit. Maybe this was just a pity offer in disguise.

Jim's stomach knotted up as an ever worse idea took shape. Maybe this whole county fair thing was just a way to trick him and humiliate him even more.

But Claire wouldn't do that, would she?

A wadded up piece of paper hit him in the back of the head, derailing his train of thought. Jim grimaced and tried to ignore it, two more wads of paper and that became impossible.

Glancing back, Jim saw Steve smirking at him, he then pretended to rub his balled up hand against his eye, doing a bad pantomime of someone crying, Seamus and Logan snickered and high fived him behind his back.

Jim bit back a slew of choice four letter words and turned forward again, from a few seats ahead and to the right he could see Toby shoot him a sympathetic glance.

Seriously, could Steve just *not* for one hour of their lives? Jim had enough on his plate as it was.

Class seemed to drag on forever, but finally the bell rang and the students started filing out, Jim lingered, packing up his bag with deliberate slowness. Toby waited by the door, but Jim waved him on. He hesitated, clearly uncertain, before walking away, giving Jim one

final lingering glance.

Mr. Strickler was cleaning off the blackboard, he hadn't noticed that Jim was still here. Jim cautiously stepped to the front of the classroom, ignoring the little voice in the back of his head shouting to get out before he made things awkward and weird. Before he could act on that instinct, Mr. Strickler finally noticed him loitering.

He turned and smiled "Ah Jim, normally I would ask if you need something, but I assume every other teacher you've had so far has given you some variation the same question. I'm curious, how did Señor Ulh's offer of assistance go?"

Involuntarily, the corners of Jim's mouth quirked up, the expression feeling almost foreign on his face. A smile. The first genuine one in days.

Somehow Mr. Strickler had known the exact right thing to say to make him feel just a tiny bit better, in spite of everything.

None of the teachers here were *bad* , but Mr. Strickler was the one who had pulled Jim up off the floor last week, brought him to his office, let him cry until he was semi functional again, called his mom to take him home.

Maybe it was irrational, but Jim trusted him just a little bit more.

"Actually...there was something I wanted to ask you,"

Mr. Strickler stopped what he was doing, putting down the rag and turning to face him fully "What seems to be the issue?"

“Well...you see, it’s…” Jim struggled to translate the gnarled knot of emotions into words “There’s this girl,”

“A girl?”

“Yeah, and she wants me and Toby to go hang out with her and her friends,”

One of Mr. Strickler’s eyebrows quirked up “And you don’t wish to do this?”

“Yes-- I mean no! I mean, I do want to, but I just...” Jim trailed off helplessly.

“You know this girl and her friends, correct?”

“We’ve...met,”

“And does the idea of spending time with them sound fun?”

Jim thought about it for a few seconds before swallowing hard and nodding.

Mr. Strickler gave a wry smile and picked up a pen from his desk, “I think I might know what your problem is,”

“You do?” even Jim wasn’t sure what his problem was.

“It sounds to me that you would like very much to go on this outing, but you’re intimidated by the idea of putting yourself out there with new people and terrified that something will go wrong,”

“That…sounds right,” Jim mumbled, he was embarrassed about having it laid out like that, but at the same time he was glad Strickler was able to explain what Jim couldn’t find the words for.

“So…I should tell her yes?”

Mr. Strickler chuckled “I think you should do whatever feels best for you. Keep in mind, while there is a certain amount of risk involved with making a change and opening yourself to new people, as a great man once said, t here can be no life without change, and to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life ,”

Jim’s blood turned to ice in his veins. He struggled to keep his face blank.

If Mr. Strickler noticed Jim’s sudden change in mood he didn’t comment on it, merely capped the pen and slipped it into his pocket “And if I may be so bold, I think you could benefit greatly from a deviation in your routine,”

Mr. Strickler didn’t know, he couldn’t have meant the words that way, but hearing them cut Jim to the bone.

There can be no life without change.

A life trapped in his house, a life of slogging through the same old routine just because he didn't know what else to do. Powerless to alter his inevitable future.

Jim balled his fingers into fists so the trembling wouldn't be too obvious. His life wasn't all doom and gloom, but Jim had gotten to the point where even the best things about his life, Mom and Toby, could barely keep him going.

He wanted more.

To be able to live free from secrecy and fear, to spend just one night of his life outside his house with other people. To be able to have an actual future.

But Jim wasn't going to get that. No matter how badly he wanted it.

He took a deep breath to steady himself, Mr. Strickler's words buzzing around in his skull.

A deviation from the routine.

Claire's face flashed in his mind.

Jim wasn't going to get what he wanted, but that didn't mean he couldn't have more.

Mr. Strickler was right, there was a risk, a huge risk. But the potential for something different, something new, was worth it. Even if it wouldn't change anything long term.

"That makes sense," Jim hefted his bag over his shoulder "I think I know what I need to do now," he started hurrying towards the door, if he was quick he could meet up with Claire and give her an answer before next period "Thanks Mr. Strickler,"

Mr. Strickler waved back as Jim walked away "I'm glad I could be of some help,"

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, when Jim finally figures out Strickler's a changeling it is going to HURT.

The quote Strickler uses is from Teddy Roosevelt, it took forever to find a quote relating to change that I liked well enough to use.

Darci

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darci spotted the two boys pulling into the parking lot on their bikes. Without turning she reached over and tapped Mary on the shoulder "They're here,"

Mary glanced up from her phone towards the newcomers, pressing a button to make the screen go dark before sliding it into her pocket.

Jim and Toby came to a stop in front of them and began locking their bikes into the nearby racks "Good afternoon ladies," Toby said while shutting his bike lock with way more flourish than was needed "I trust the ride here was pleasant enough?"

Darci was barely able to keep from groaning while Mary disguised a snicker as a cough, "Yeah, my dad dropped us off," Toby wasn't nasty with his flirting, not compared to some of the jerks they'd had to deal with, but it got old *fast* .

Jim stood up from his bike and glanced around the parking lot "So, uh...is Claire here? I thought she said--"

"Here I am!" Claire jogged up to the group, panting from the exertion of her short run "I had to get the wristbands from my mom," she handed out four strips of waxy paper, keeping the fifth to fasten around her own wrist "These should get us on any ride here,"

Jim's eyes practically popped out of his skull "You didn't have to buy all these, my mom gave me some money to--"

“It’s no big deal. As one of the city council members hosting the fair she gets a certain number of wristbands for free,”

“Oh…that’s cool,”

They finished attaching the wristbands and headed into the fairgrounds proper. In no time at all they were surrounded by eye burningly bright primary colors splashed onto every structure and tent, metal creaked against metal as the rides started up with the first passengers of the afternoon. And it smelled like something, or maybe everything, was being being deep fried.

Darci eyed the boys walking a few steps ahead between her and her friends. They seemed alright as far as boys went, but hanging out with people that weren’t Claire or Mary just felt weird. But that wasn’t a reason to not hang out with them. If anything that was *more* of a reason. When Darci started high school she’d made a promise to herself. Get out of her comfort zone, spend time with people that she wasn’t friends with already.

Steeling herself, Darci sucked in a big breath through her nose.

She could do this.

Her own personal goals aside, this whole thing had been Claire’s idea. To try and reach out to Jim after what had happened two weeks ago.

Not to mention they’d learned some pretty nasty details about why exactly Jim had broken down in the first place.

Claire had practically begged her and Mary to come with today, so that Jim wouldn't think this was just a pity date. Not that she had to twist Darci's arm too hard. She was always willing to lend a hand, especially when it involved going to the county fair. And if it forced her to spend time with new people, that was just an added bonus.

Now time to put operation Darci-comes-out-of-her-shell into action.

"So what do we want to do first?" she piped up.

They all glanced around at the various rides and booths, Mary's gaze landed on a large, white tent "How about we see what's in there?"

"Sure,"

"Sounds good,"

"I'm ok with anything,"

Reaching a lukewarm agreement, the five of them headed over to the tent in question. Stepping inside, Darci was hit with an odor that was musty and undeniably animal. Looking around, she saw that the whole tent was full of small to medium sized cages sitting on the straw covered ground and on plastic tables set up around the room.

"I think this is where 4H is showing some of their animals,"

Toby crept closer to one of the cages, looking at the swan contained in it with wide eyes, only for the bird to flare it's wings and hiss

menacingly at him, causing all five of them to jump back.

Jim let out a nervous laugh “Hah...didn’t know swans could hiss like that,”

Darci raised an eyebrow “Have you *seen* canadian geese? Birds are monsters,”

Mary edged around the swan’s cage, making sure to never turn her back to it “Maybe we should skip the birds...”

They moved over to the other side of the tent, it looked like this was the rabbit area, based on the abundance of bunnies in the cages around them.

Claire fiddled with the tag on one of the enclosures “I wonder what they judge rabbits for?”

“Says here that this one is a ‘Holland Lop’,” Mary said while squinting at a cream colored rabbit with long floppy ears “‘Junior buck’, whatever that means,”

Claire stepped over to the Holland Lop cage and looked in, Darci and the boys joining them.

“What I’m wondering,” Darci asked “Is what they do with all these rabbits after the competition is over,”

They all pondered over that for a moment.

“Meat maybe?” Toby chimed in.

They all looked back at the adorable little bunny sitting in its cage and winced. Darci thought she could even see Jim turn a little green.

Toby flushed and shifted from foot to foot. The silence awkward and heavy.

Darci wasn’t *against* eating rabbit meat, at least not in principle, but definitely not while looking at one of the cute little balls of fluff.

Needing to do something to break the tension, Darci scrolled over all the rabbit cages, only to do a double take when she got to the end of the row. Not quite believing what she was seeing, Darci stepped closer to it “Guys,” she pointed at the cage sitting on the end “Look,”

They all turned towards the cage in question, each of them freezing in turn before slowly approaching. The cage held a rabbit, much like the others, but with one *huge* difference.

“Awesomesauce….” Toby said in a hushed, reverent whisper.

Reaching over, Mary pulled up the tag “Apparently it's a ‘Flemish Giant’,”

Claire leaned her face right up against the wire of the cage “I didn’t even know rabbits could get this big,”

The rest of them made sounds of assent, still fixed on the almost comically oversized rabbit that was still chewing on its grass, oblivious to the teenagers gawking at it.

“This thing’s the size of a coyote,” Darci said, still reeling from the fact that this rabbit could actually exist in real life.

“I’m pretty sure even coyotes are smaller than this,” Jim added.

Claire snorted “Can you imagine, a coyote sticks its head into a rabbit hole only to come face with twenty pounds of solid bunny?”

A giggle rippled through the group.

“That would be awesome!” Toby got right near the cage next to Mary “I totally want to see this guy duke it out with a coyote now,”

“Tobes I’m pretty sure the people here wouldn’t be down with animal fight club,”

“But could you imagine!”

They all laughed.

And just like that, the ice was broken.

Once they were done looking at the animals, they all went and checked out the rides, which were all pretty fun, in a sketchy, county

fair kind of way.

After the teacups they made a unanimous decision to take a break from rides before someone,

Claire, and Darci if she was honest with herself,

Puked, moving to the games. They were all rigged across the board, Darci knew that, but they could still be fun.

Forty minutes and thirty dollars later, all they had to show for it was a fish that Toby won and graciously declined at ring toss,

Apparently it wouldn't get along with his Nana's cats,

And the giant plush penguin Mary had somehow defied the odds and managed to pop ten balloons in a row to get.

Once they'd been forced to quit at the games for the sake of their lightening wallets and empty stomachs, the five of them migrated towards the food tents to get something to eat.

Snacks bought and paid for; Claire, Mary, and Toby wasted no time tucking in. Jim and Darci held back, eyeing the...food...in front of them suspiciously.

"C'mon guys," Mary said between bites of her corn dog "It's not going to kill you,"

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that….” Jim said while nervously prodding at the golden brown lump in front of him with his fork “I like cheesecake as much as the next guy, but deep frying it seems like a mistake...”

Darci looked down at her own cheesecake uncertainly, her feelings exactly.

“Quit being such a food snob Jim,” Toby chided “We didn’t come to the county fair to *not* eat delicious fried foods of dubious origin,”

“Just try it guys,” Claire’s own fried cheesecake had been reduced to a paper wrapper and the wooden stick it came on “I swear it’s really good,”

Darci and Jim shared a grimace, knowing that they had lost the battle. Gingerly, Darci tore off a chunk of cheesecake with her fork and raised it to her mouth, Jim doing the same.

She bit down and started chewing, preparing herself for the worst, but much to her surprise, it was scrumptious. The crispy fried outside and the sweet, creamy cheesecake filling went together perfectly.

“Ok I admit it,” Jim said, the picture of defeat “This is delicious,”

“Told you so,” Toby said in a sing-song tone while Mary and Claire smirked at them.

Darci opted to ignore them in favor of eating more cheesecake.

The loud beeping of a phone alarm made Darci jump in her seat and swallow her cheesecake prematurely.

Jim slipped his phone out of his pocket, causing the ringing to intensify, before he tapped the screen a few times until the sound stopped. He slid the phone back into his jacket pocket before gathering up his food.

“Sorry guys, I have to take off now,”

Skeptical, Darci glanced towards the horizon. It was *really* early, the sun wasn’t even down yet. What was the rush?

“Already?” Claire lowered the deep fried oreo she had been preparing to take a bite of. She sounded pretty disappointed. Of course she was, Jim was her secret, not-so-secret, crush “Do you have to go now? There’s going to be a fireworks show later,”

Jim flashed them an apologetic look while folding the paper wrapper around his cheesecake “Sorry, my mom really doesn’t like me being out too late,”

“Don’t worry about it,” Darci jumped in, if there was anyone that understood overprotective parents, it was her “We can hang out some more later,”

Claire’s deep fried oreo fell out of her hand and Mary’s eyes widened. They had all agreed to go to the fair together, but none of them had said anything about what they would do beyond tonight.

The stunned looks on her friends' faces didn't bother Darci one bit. She knew what she was doing, Toby and Jim were a lot of fun. Definitely people that they could spend more time with.

Operations Darci-comes-out-of-her-shell and help-Claire-with-her-not-pity-date were both off to a terrific start.

Toby was smiling from ear to ear and Jim visibly brightened at this "That...sounds really nice," he stood from the table, picked up his food, and started heading towards where his bike was parked "I'll see you guys later, thanks again for inviting us,"

"See you tomorrow Jim," Toby waved as his friend walked away "I'll try to win you a stuffed animal,"

"Bye,"

"See you later,"

"Have a good night,"

Darci, Mary, and Claire joined Toby in waving and saying goodbye, actions Jim mirrored until he was out of sight.

There was a brief murmuring of disappointment at Jim's departure, but the cheerful mood quickly returned. All of them, four now, finishing their food and getting ready to go back to the rides.

Darci swallowed the last few bites of her cheesecake and chucked the

stick in the trash. Tonight was going great. Jim and Toby were nice guys, and they'd all had a lot of fun.

They should definitely do this again.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas! Enjoy this nice fluffy chapter where these beans get to enjoy the county fair.

(Now wave goodbye, that's the last of the fluff for a long time)

Mary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mary wanted to let out an indignant scoff, but seeing how her mouth was full of nachos she settled for a scowl. Seriously, it had been two days and Dean *still* hadn't texted her back. At first she had just been annoyed, now she was straight up mad.

No more playing nice, if Dean wanted her back it was going to cost him a date with pizza *and* ice cream.

A wry smile broke through her frown.

Of course it wasn't like she *needed* Dean, plenty of other boys would give anything to go out with her. Henry, otherwise known as Tight-Jeans Hank, had just asked her to go to the basketball game this week, maybe she should take him up on it, show Dean what he was missing out on.

"I didn't make the team,"

Mary practically jumped out of her seat. She was so engrossed in her texts that she hadn't even noticed Darci sitting down across from her.

"What?"

Darci was staring down at the logo stamped into the middle of the table, eyes scrunched and mouth crumpled. It took Mary a few seconds to realize she was holding back tears.

“The cheerleading team, I didn’t make the cut,”

Mary gently slid her phone into her pocket “Sorry…that sucks,”

Heat started to bloom on her face as silence stretched out between the two of them, thick and tacky. Mary never knew what to say in these kinds of situations. She couldn't just tell Darci it wasn’t as bad as it seemed, in her track record saying that never went over well. Bottom line, Mary sucked at making people feel better when they were down. Whatever she tried always seemed to make things worse.

Fortunately both of them were saved when Claire came swooping in and planted herself in the seat beside Darci.

“I’m so sorry,” Claire reached over grasped Darci’s hand with hers “That must be such a let down after all your hard work,”

Darci’s lower lip trembled “I knew they weren’t going to let more than one or two freshman onto the team, but I thought that maybe I was good enough…”

She trailed off as Claire patted the back of her hand “You’re plenty good enough Darci, they probably just didn’t have enough spots available. I’m sure that next year they’ll be glad to have you,”

“Thanks Claire,”

Mary watched as Claire successfully pulled Darci back from the brink of tears, wriggling uncomfortably, wishing she could be half as

comforting and sweet as Claire. She didn't envy her friends for a lot of things, but this was one of them.

She sat up straighter as an idea came to her. Mary might suck at sympathy, but maybe she could help by providing a welcome distraction.

"Yeah, you'll be on the team for sure next year," Mary's eyes twinkled "Maybe by then Claire will have finally asked Jimmy-Jam out,"

The sharp look on Claire's face made Mary wonder if this had been the right move after all. Then Darci let out a small laugh and she stopped wondering.

She let herself relax a little bit, Claire still looked pissed about her love life being brought up, but Darci was smiling so Mary decided to roll with it.

"Yesterday you went on and on about how today was the day you were finally going to do it, but in the end you chickened out," she smirked "Again,"

Claire didn't reply to that but her rapidly pinkening cheeks did all the talking.

Darci giggled, successfully distracted now "Come on Claire, we've been hanging out with the boys for weeks, when are you planning on actually telling Jim that you like-like him?"

She let out a deep sigh "Soon, ok, soon,"

“You know Claire, the longer you wait, the more likely it is some other girl snaches him up,”

“What!”

“What Mare means…” Darci said while throwing a knowing look in Mary’s direction “Is if you really like Jim you should just tell him that, get the words out there” she placed a reassuring hand on Claire’s shoulder “And if it makes you feel better, I think that Jim likes you to,”

“You…think so?”

“Better hurry, I saw Valerie eyeing him during social studies,”

If looks could kill Claire would have her dead on the ground “Are you actually invested in my love life or do you just want to watch me suffer?”

“Yes,”

Claire looked back and forth between Mary and Darci’s eager expressions, then buried her face into her hands with a groan “Look, I know you guys are just trying to help. But I really need to figure this out on my own. So can you just…give me some space on this,”

Translation; time to back off now.

“Ok, ok,” Mary said, knowing not to push further “But when you do ask him out, promise we’ll be the first to know?”

Claire nodded “Promise,”

Satisfied, Mary went back to her nachos, Claire and Darci following suit with their own lunches. Based on the clock it wouldn’t be long before Jim and Toby joined them.

Strange how normal a thought that was.

This time last year the idea of having lunch with anyone else besides her besties was unthinkable. Sometimes Mary still couldn’t believe the boys were part of their unofficial ‘group’ now.

She hadn’t had a problem going along with Claire’s county fair idea. Claire had wanted to make Jim happy and Mary wanted to make Claire happy. Just one day out, no harm no foul.

But when Darci had wanted to keep hanging around with the boys after that, Mary hadn’t exactly been thrilled.

Maintaining their hard won social status took a lot of work, and she wasn’t going to jeopardize that, not even for the boy Claire was crushing on. Besides, the three of them had been BFFs since kindergarten, and Mary wasn’t going to let just anyone butt in on that, let alone boys.

Mary didn’t have anything against boys. Actually she liked them quite a bit. Boys could be cool and pretty darn fun to hang around with, but only if a girl kept her distance. Letting a boy get too close was a

rookie mistake. Mary had learned that lesson the hard way and there was no way in hell she was letting Claire or Darci get hurt like that.

So yeah, she hadn't been down with turning this into a thing.

But Darci wanted to hang out with Toby and Jim more and of course Claire had all but jumped to agree. Even if she had put her foot down Mary was outvoted two to one, so she just gritted her teeth and put up with the boys tagging along.

Sitting together at lunch, hanging out after school. Claire even invited them along to videogame Saturday at her house; an event that had been exclusive to the three of them for years!

Mary hadn't dropped her guard the entire time, always keeping watch for any sign that either Toby or Jim would push their newfound privilege too far.

One toe out of line and she'd kick them to the curb so fast it would leave skid marks.

She'd kept up her hypervigilance for weeks, but nothing had ever come of it. Mary had known boys that would act all nice and then do a 180 the second they had you where they wanted you, but Toby and Jim actually seemed genuinely….nice.

Jim shared his lunch when Darci was down on cash, and offered to bring an extra any time one of them needed it. Toby lent out his geology notes and kept them all from completely flunking a pop quiz. The enitre time she'd known them Jim and Toby had never been anything less than friendly and helpfull. More than that, neither of them ever acted like their good behavior entitled them to...more.

Toby and Jim weren't just acting nice, they were nice; a little dorky maybe, but nice.

So after weeks of being on edge Mary finally eased up. The boys might not have earned her full trust just yet, but they had gained quite a bit of it, enough for her to call them friends.

And speak of the devil, Toby and Jim chose that moment to show up at their table. She waved in greeting, mouth still full. Toby smiled and waved back "How's it going guys, oh hey Darci, did you hear about the cheer team yet?"

Darci's face fell "I didn't make the cut,"

Jim winced as he slid into his seat "Bummer,"

Toby looked affronted on her behalf "If they were crazy enough to turn you down that's their loss,"

She managed a weak grin "Thanks guys,"

The conversations died down again as they all started eating in earnest. Not because they didn't have anything to talk about, but because they didn't have the time. Lunch period was barely long enough to get a full meal in, especially when you got your lunch from the food truck in the park like they did today. They didn't have to rush, but they couldn't exactly take their time either.

Mary was able to multitask by chowing down on her nachos with her

left hand and tapping at her phone with her right.

She was finished checking her texts so she moved on to organize her calendar. Planning and coordinating all of their group's outings took a lot of time and effort, but all four of her friends thanked her on a regular basis and let her know how much they appreciated it.

It might be a lot of hard work, but it really was good to be Queen Bee.

And when she spotted an event planned for that weekend, Mary realized it was a very good thing she decided to check her calendar when all five of them were at lunch together.

"Darc, Claire; how much prep time will you need for your makeup on Saturday?"

Darci perked up instantly "I'll need half an hour at the very least,"

Claire puzzled over it for a bit longer before answering "Mine should take ten, fifteen minutes tops,"

Mary added a note to the event before turning to Jim and Toby "What about you guys?"

The two just blinked at her, Jim hesitantly raising a hand into the air "Uh, question, why are we talking about makeup?"

"To go with our costumes, duh,"

Toby nervously tapped his fingers against the table “....costumes?

Mary gave both of them a flat, unimpressed stare “For the Halloween Hop on Saturday that we’ve been talking about for weeks. Seriously, do you guys never check Messenger?”

Jim still didn’t look like he was getting it “The Halloween Hop?”

“Yep,” Claire said with a grin “I’m going as a vampire,”

“I’m going as a corpse bride,” Darci added.

Realization dawned on Toby’s face as things clicked into place “Those sound awesomely spooky, what about you Mary?”

“Mermaid,”

“Nice,”

“So wait,” Jim spoke up, still sounding confused “That’s this weekend?”

Her eye roll practically scraped the ceiling “Yeah they’ve had flyers posted for weeks. Now spill, what are you going as and how much time are you going to need to suit up? We need to get there by six,”

Finally she could see the lightbulb going off in Jim's head as he came up to speed.

Toby let out a sharp gasp "We should go as Freddy Kruger and Jason! I already have a hockey mask, all we need is a hat, glove, and fake machete,"

Mary nodded in approval and looked back down at her phone "Can you guys be ready at Darci's house at six? Her dad can drive us there and my moms agreed to pick us up. Afterwards they can drop you off at home or…"

She deliberately paused, letting the anticipation build for a few seconds. Seeing as how the boys were a little slow on the uptake Mary might as well relish the big reveal "We can all spend the night at my house, my moms will be home all night and they say it's fine,"

If Toby grinned any wider he was going to crack his face in half "A sleepover?! Awesomesauce!"

So Jim and Toby were in, good. Tonight Mary would let her moms know so they could exchange numbers with Jim's mom and Toby's Nana, then she had to make sure they had enough snacks for all five of--

"Actually…" Jim's voice derailed her train of thought "I won't be able to make it,"

Mary frowned "If your mom isn't cool with the boy-girl thing, just let my moms talk to her, they'll make her come around,"

Jim chewed on his lower lip, not looking reassured at all “It’s…not that…I can’t do any of it,”

Wait. What?

“You mean you can’t come to the sleepover *or* the Halloween hop?”

“Nope, sorry,”

She narrowed her eyes “Is it because of your curfew?”

Jim looked down and away “No,”

Translation, it most certainly was. The real question was why she was even surprised at this point.

Mary scowled and set her phone down on the table “Seriously? Come on Jim you *always* bail early, can’t you ignore your crazy early curfew just this once?”

“If your mom’s worried it’s totally safe,” Darci added helpfully “We’ll be at school with the teachers or at Mary’s house with her moms the whole time,”

Claire leaned closer to him, expression hopeful and pleading “My parents can talk to her, they’re super big on safety, so if they think it’s ok for me to go you know it’s danger free,”

Jim opened his mouth, no doubt to object, but stopped when Toby laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Dr. Lake has nothing to worry about," Toby smiled up expectantly at him "You're not a little kid anymore, you need a night out, your mom will understand,"

Jim shut his jaw with a click, biting back whatever rebuttal he'd had. They'd all given him a hard time about the ridiculous hours his mom wanted him home by at some point, but this was the first time all four of them had ganged up about it, leaving absolutely no room for counterarguments.

Mary arched a single eyebrow "So do you think you can convince your mom to let you off the hook for one night?"

He snapped out of his speechlessness "It's not that!"

"They *why* ?"

"The reason I can't come is...is…" Jim stammered "...is because my mom and I...are going camping,"

Mary's jaw dropped "You and your mom are going camping?"

He grinned sheepishly "Yeah, it's kind of our family thing,"

"In *October?!* "

Jim's already brittle smile wavered "Yeah...she's an ER doctor so her work schedule is weird, she can't always pick what days off she gets so we have to go camping whenever we can, right Toby?"

Looking majorly disappointed, Toby still nodded in agreement "Yeah, I remember one year her schedule was so packed you guys didn't go on vacation for six months and then you went to Yosemite for two solid weeks,"

Claire's face fell "So you guys can't go on another weekend?"

"Nope, sorry,"

Mary's eyes narrowed as she fought to keep her mouth from twisting into an ugly snarl. While she didn't consider herself a troublemaker, Mary had gotten pretty darn good at telling people what they wanted to hear in order to weasel her way out of tight spots, like detention or extra homework. And she could tell that Jim was doing the exact same thing right now.

Jim was lying, there was no camping trip.

But then why couldn't he go to the Halloween Hop, or the sleepover for that matter, or *literally* anything?

Was his curfew no exceptions, or was there some other reason he couldn't go out on Saturday. Maybe he couldn't bear to sleep away from home? Mary had known some kids like that, but that was when they were all little, there was no way that could be going on with Jim now, could it?

Mary wanted to trust him, she already trusted Jim and Toby more than any other boys their age.

But Jim was *lying* to her, to all of them.

Her fingers dug into the fabric of her jeans and Jim babbled on about the imaginary camping trip that prevented him from joining them that weekend. She was one bad decision away from reaching across the table and shaking him by the shoulders, demanding *actual* answers.

Quick as the thought crossed her mind, a hot wave of shame followed.

Stealing the truth wasn't the right way to go. Mary wanted to know what was going on with Jim, but that didn't entitle her to his dirty laundry.

She had learned that lesson the same week she met him.

Mary took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. Jim was a friend, her friend, and she would let him keep his secrets. He could share them in his own time.

"Fine, if you can't go you can't go," Mary said with she hoped was a friendly, not insincere looking, smile "Just let me know when you and your mom are going camping, that way I can plan around it, ok?"

Jim beamed back at her "You betcha,"

Chapter End Notes

What's the trick to writing minor characters that are given very little screen-time? Figure out what parts of your personality you can project onto them then ride that horse to the races.

Seeing as how Mary's parents are never shown or mentioned on screen, I spent a lot of time figuring out what I wanted her family to be like in this story. The idea of Mary having two moms came from Becoming the Mask, but whereas in that story Mary's bio-parents divorced and her bio-mom got remarried to her step-mom (who may or may not be a changeling) in this AU, one of Mary's mom's is trans, so they're both her biological parents.

A few of you might have noticed that updates have been few and far between. The main reason for this is I'm busy studying for the BOC exam on top of putting in my required hours at my clinical site for my med tech program. So as much as I don't like it my writing can't be my top priority now. That being said, going forward I'm going to try to update every three weeks. The last thing I want is to make a commitment that I can't keep, but sticking to a schedule might be the best thing to help me stay organized.

Coming March 6th, Barbara and Jim go on a very last minute camping trip.

Barbara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara pulled her coat tighter around her and shivered. The air out here was brisk and sharp, but the roaring fire in front of her helped take the edge off. And a good mug of hot tea didn't hurt either. Still, it wasn't about to get any warmer. Jim had said he wouldn't be out long tonight, just a quick walk and back in time to go to bed by eleven.

Not that the cold bothered him.

Wind rustled through the trees around her, autumnal reds and golds rustling against evergreen needles. It wasn't really *that* late in the season, but it certainly wasn't early either. Barbara and Jim usually prefered to do their trips during the more palatable times of year, then again, this wasn't one of their usual trips.

She might be oblivious more often than she cared to admit, but Barbara wasn't blind. She saw the posters printed on orange and black paper hanging on the community board at the hospital. Heard her coworkers talk about all the plans their kids were making together. Plans involving candy and costumes and spending the night out on the town. Plans no teenager would dare turn down without very good reason.

Like say a family vacation.

So when Jim called her during the middle of school three days ago, begging her to take the weekend off and go camping, she hadn't been very surprised.

Saddened, but not surprised.

Pulling an impromptu camping trip off hadn't been easy by any means. Between the lateness of the season and the incredibly short notice, Barbara had barely been able to get the reservations in place, not to mention gathering all the supplies they needed. But she had rolled up her sleeves, dug in her heels, and made magic happen.

And now here they were. Sitting in the middle of the woods, pretending that they would both rather be here than at home celebrating the holiday with friends and family.

A burning sensation built up behind her eyes. Barbara set her mug to the side, if she tried to drink anything now she'd only end up choking on her own tears.

It wasn't fair, not to either of them, but especially to Jim. She knew being cooped because of his transformations was hard. Even more so when he had to say no to going out and having fun with his friends.

On some days the only way Barbara was able to get up in the morning was by telling herself that all of this was temporary. One day she would find a cure and Jim would be free of his transformations, then they both would be able to live their lives without this nightmare.

Things might be bad now, but only for a little while, sooner or later it would end. For years she had told herself this and for years it had worked.

At least until Jim's last birthday. When Barbara stopped being so sure that there would even be an end.

She stuffed the dismal thoughts into the back of her mind and tried to force herself to relax in her seat. No point working herself into a downward spiral. It hadn't worked the first dozen times she'd done it, no reason to think it would be any more productive now.

Looking around while pulling her jacket tighter around her shoulders, Barbara checked the periphery of their campsite for signs of Jim's return. She couldn't see much, the fire was bright but not that bright. The only things she had a clear view of were her small tent, the clear area laid down with blankets on top of a tarp for Jim, the electric lantern behind her bolstering the dim firelight, the ATV they used to get out here, their cooler and chest full of supplies, and just a fraction of the miles of forest around her.

No sign of Jim.

Barbara glanced at her watch, sighed, threw another log on the fire, grabbed a couple of magazines from the stack, and settled in to wait. Jim always told her not to wait up for him, but it wasn't like she could sleep without knowing where her son was. Better to pass the time with a magazine. Barbara never went camping without a fat stack of them. They could help her pass the time when Jim was out on his walks and could be repurposed as kindling so they didn't have to haul them back. She always made a point to grab some from the waiting room at work when they cycled the new issues in.

Reaching over to the stack at her feet, she glanced between the copies of *People* and *National Geographic* before tossing the *People* into the fire. Gossip rags had never been her thing.

Yawning, Barbara thumbed through the *National Geographic* . Hopefully this would keep her more entertained. One of the cover stories looked promising, *'The Salem Witch Trials: Over three centuries later'* . Sounded better than celebrity gossip at least.

Barbara flipped to the corresponding page and started the article using the speed reading techniques she learned in medical school. It was ok, but pretty ho-hum, no more or less entertaining than watching the History channel. Should be an adequate way to pass the next twenty minutes.

Which was exactly what Barbara planned on doing until she came to a line that caused the world around her to come crashing down around her.

Whipping her head to the side Barbara coughed and sputtered up the tea that had gotten rediverted into her lungs due to her shock.

She couldn't have read what she just did, it was impossible, delusional even.

But when she turned back toward the page with a pounding heart there it was. A deceptively innocuous line of text buried in the middle of the article.

The true witch hunt began with the arrests of Tituba, Sarah Osbourne, and Sarah Good.

Sarah Good.

The same name tied to the mystery that haunted their family for the past ten years.

For a few seconds she forgot how to breathe, just sat there staring at the words printed in cheap ink on even cheaper paper. Mouth open, sitting frozen rigid in her seat, gears whiring as her brain processed all

the implications of this.

Was it just a coincidence? Sarah Good couldn't be that rare of a name, or could there be a connection?

It was a stretch, even by the Lake family's standards.

Her fifteen year old son turned blue and sprouted horns when the sun went down and had been doing so for the past decade. Nothing was off the table.

She flipped back and began rereading the article with much more intensity, blood rushing in her ears.

Moral panic, mass hysteria, mob mentality. According to the stuffy old professors that wrote the article there wasn't anything even remotely magical about the Salem witch trials.

But they hadn't seen the things Barbara had, lived the things she'd lived.

Was it somehow possible that one of these long ago women was more than she seemed? Had a touch of something that could still be causing ripples centuries later?

The paper crinkled under her fingers. If there really was a connection, and Barbara wasn't sure that there was, then this was their biggest break in years.

As soon as she got home Barbara was going to take this new lead and hit the library, hit Wikipedia, hit anything and everything that might offer her the slightest clue. There was a chance, however faint, that history might hold some of the answers that had eluded them for a decade.

Her lips parted as she leaned in and skewered the magazine with her gaze, feeling almost feverish.

A dream, an idea, too lofty and terrifying to imagine flickered to life in the back of her mind, despite her best efforts to snuff it out before her hopes could rise too high.

Barbara knew first hand how much it hurt when hope was dashed to pieces, but she had forgotten just how intoxicating it could be.

If history had the answers, then it just might have a cu--

“Mom?”

Barbara shrieked, tea sloshed out of her mug and the magazine went flying.

Jim took a hesitant step back “Sorry, did I scare you?”

“NO! no-- I just--” Barbara glanced back towards where the magazine had landed “I was just really engrossed in the article I was reading,”

Jim cocked his head “What was it about?”

“I-- it….”

He blinked back at her, wide eyed and curious.

“…something about the revolutionary war, how was your walk?”

Barbara forced a smile and very deliberately did not look toward where the magazine had fallen. She would tell Jim, but not yet. Only once she had discovered something solid, more tangible.

She couldn’t raise his hopes when she wasn’t even sure that her own were founded.

“Fine,” Jim took a seat at the fire across from her “Moon’s full, that was pretty cool,”

Barbara nodded and leaned back in her seat, picking up her half-full mug and willing the buzz of nervous energy in her limbs to fade. She reached for the long wooden branch to poke at the fire, only to notice the tote bag at her feet. That’s right, with all the excitement of her discovery she had almost forgotten.

“Jim, I have a surprise for you,”

He perked up instantly “Really? What?”

“Here,” she lifted the tote and tossed it across the fire towards him.

Jim caught it with ease and reached an arm in, pulling out a smaller plastic bag with a look of surprise “Candy corn?”

“Yep,” Barbara gave him a gentle smile “Happy Halloween kiddo,”

Jim smiled back at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes “Thanks mom,” he tore open the bag and started popping the orange triangles into his mouth while staring into the fire, expression unreadable.

They sat like that for a few minutes, the only sounds Jim’s chewing and the crackling of the fire, before Barbara couldn’t bite her tongue any more.

Normally she would leave well enough alone, but reading what she did in that magazine had set her thoughts a-buzzing like a nest of hornets.

She didn’t want to corner Jim like this, to put him on the spot, make an already stressful trip worse. But she couldn’t just stay quiet, her own conscience wouldn’t let her.

For years Barbara had *tried* , tried so hard to give Jim space. Let him deal with his problems without hounding him every ten seconds.

It wasn’t until Jim broke down crying in school that she realized just how poorly that approach had worked out.

Jim had shouldered so much by himself, struggling in silence, until one day came the staw that broke the camel’s back. Leaving him a

shattered wreck.

Of course who's fault was that? A nasty voice whispered in her ear. Who should have been modeling healthy coping mechanisms for him? Who showed up after work every day dead tired and still pasted a smile on her face for years and pretended like everything was fine even when they both knew it that it damn well wasn't.

Who was it that taught Jim to bottle up his emotions until he exploded?

More importantly, what kind of mother didn't notice that her child was in pain?

Barbara steeled herself even though her stomach still churned with doubt. Even if it meant pushing his boundaries she wasn't going to let Jim fall into such a bad place, not again, not if she could help it.

"How are you Jim? I mean really,"

Jim didn't respond at first, merely finished chewing his mouthful of candy and swallowed, but he didn't pick up any more.

"Better," he said after a long time.

Barbara's gut twisted with equal parts anxiety and relief. Better wasn't anything to dismiss, but it wasn't the same thing as good either.

The days following Jim's fifteenth birthday, and the realization that

things might not get better than they were now, had been some of the worst of both of their lives, only comparable to the days after James's departure and the night Jim first changed.

And as bad as things had been for her, she knew Jim's condition was far *far* worse.

He had sunk into a deep slump and stayed there for days. Barely speaking, barely eating; not even glancing at anything, video games, vespa magazines, cooking equipment, that had brought him joy just a few days before. Jim had been in such a dark place, and Barbara was powerless to help him find his way out.

"Better how?"

Jim twisted the plastic of the bag around his finger "Me and Toby are hanging out with Mary, Darci, and Claire; you know about them, right?"

Barbara nodded.

One day in the middle of his depression, just when she'd been starting to worry that her son would never smile again, out of the blue Jim had come home and told her that he was invited to go to the county fair with Toby and some girls from his class. Unsure what to do with this development, Barbara had sent Jim off with a kiss on the forehead and $20 to pay his way, hoping for the best.

When Jim had come home that night he was smiling brighter than he had in a long time.

Those three names had come up frequently in Jim's gushing the night following the county fair. And for many nights after.

"Has being friends with them...helped?"

"Oh yeah, they're really fun," Jim said with a grin "We hang out almost every day after school and during our off period, Mary always has the best ideas about what to do and Darci is a total daredevil, plus Steve never bothers us when we're with them,"

That got her attention "I'm sorry, what?"

Jim's eyes widened, clearly having revealed more than he intended.

Barbara's mouth straightened into a hard line "Who is this Steve and how does he 'bother' you?"

"A guy in my class, and nothing really," his eyes darted around the clearing, landing on anything but her "Honestly it's not a big deal,"

"Jim." her voice was iron, and offered no room for negotiation.

He squirmed but remained silent.

Barbara fixed him with a narrowed gaze and waited.

A minute and a half was all it took.

“It’s...sometimes he…” Jim stared down at the fire, still unable to look her in the eye “He’ll...push me and trip me in the hall, little stuff like that,”

Barbara could practically feel her blood pressure rising “That is unacceptable. When we get home we’re going to talk to the school about him,”

Jim visibly cringed “You don’t need to do that mom, I can handle Steve, please just don’t make a big deal about this”

Somehow her frown got even deeper. This *was* a big deal. No matter the circumstances, Barbara was *not* going to let Jim minimize someone else’s violent behavior.

“This isn’t up for debate. You shouldn’t have to *handle* another student being violent with you,”

“It’s not that bad, telling will just make things worse,”

“Has he threatened to retaliate if you tell on him!?”

“No! I-- it’s just…” Jim trailed off, his words hanging in the air.

The silence as taut as a wire.

Then he sighed, sounding utterly defeated “Things at school are finally

normal again, Steve might give me a hard time...but everyone else has finally stopped looking at me weird,"

Jim looked up and met her eyes "Steve's a jerk, a huge jerk, but I can handle him, I just want…" his voice dropped into a hoarse whisper "I just want other people to at least *think* I'm normal,"

Her throat was tight. It rankled, more than that, it went against every instinct Barbara had to ignore a bully, and a violent one at that. It felt wrong, hell, that was probably because it *was* wrong. But could she really make things for Jim more turbulent after he'd finally regained some stability in his life?

His life that was only going to get more difficult from here on out.

Or maybe it wouldn't.

Barbara shut her eyes and let out a deep breath "Ok, if you don't think the situation with Steve needs addressing we can leave it be,"

Jim perked up.

" *However* , if things start to escalate with him, even a little bit, you let me know right away, got it?"

Jim nodded "Got it,"

"Good," Barbara leaned back and forced herself to take another sip of tea.

The uncomfortable subject was officially dropped, but things were still strained between them, waiting to snap under the slightest trigger.

“Steve may be a jerk,” Jim said softly “But I really am doing better,”

“Are you Jim? Are you *really* ?” she knew her tone was sharper than it should be, but right now she didn’t have the mental space to worry about that. Right now Barbara was too worried and too scared and too frazzled and too tired. So goddamn tired “Because I feel like everytime you say that it’s only to make *me* feel better. You never tell me when things are bad or that you’re hurting,”

“I swear I’m not downplaying things this time!”

“How do I know that? You didn’t tell me what was going on on your birthday, you didn’t tell me about being kicked out of the Mole scouts-- Christ, another student’s been harassing you at school and this is the first I’m hearing about it!”

“This-- this isn’t like that!”

“Well I don’t want the next time that I find out you’re struggling to be when one of your teachers calls me because you broke down crying again!”

Her mouth shut with a click. She’d gone too far, *way* too far. Barbara should not have said that. But now the words were out there, and she couldn’t take them back if she tried.

The stunned look on Jim's face told her that he hadn't been expecting her to go this far either.

Neither one of them said anything for a long time

"There's social media," Jim finally spoke up in a quiet voice "Mary practically forced me to make seven new accounts so I can follow her on everything," he gave a weak smile "So even if they move away we can still stay in touch,"

"Jim…"

"And Darci's dad's a cop and Claire's mom is a politician, so maybe not all of them will move away..."

Jim straightened and raised his head towards her. The look on his face, uncertain but so *so* determined, tore at her heartstrings "I really am doing better,"

Barbara got up from her seat and walked over to him, reaching out and laying a hand on his shoulder "And I'm happy for you, I'm glad that you're doing better and I'm sorry I snapped at you like that. It was wrong of me to say what I did and I promise I won't do that again,"

She gave his shoulder a comforting squeeze "I'm glad things are better for you now, but if they get bad again...please don't hide it. Talk to me, share how you feel so it doesn't build up,"

It was a testament to how tall he was getting that Barbara barely had to kneel to look Jim in the eye even while he was sitting "I know you

think you're protecting me when you hide your problems, but remember, we're a team. And I can't help you if I don't know that something's wrong,"

Even with the tusks she could see his lip start to quiver "We take care of each other," Jim's voice was thick with emotion "Right?"

Her own eyes brimming, Barbara pulled him into a hug "Right,"

Their embrace lasted a few more seconds, long enough for both of them to sniffle their unshed tears away, before Barbara gently pulled back, Jim releasing her willingly, and went back to her seat.

She took a few more sips of tea and he munched on his candy corn while the fire cracked and popped between them, the silence much more palatable now.

Her tea was almost gone when Jim spoke up again.

"Actually, there is something…"

"What is it?" Barbara forced herself to stay calm and not jump down his throat with a dozen questions. Jim was putting himself out there, now she had to do her part and let him speak.

Jim shifted uncomfortably in his seat "You know Claire? One of the new girls I've been hanging out with?"

"Yes?"

“I…like her…as…more than a friend,” even as he said those words he slumped back in his seat, like a puppet with the strings cut “But I can’t…date her or even tell her as long…” he sank even lower “As long as I’m like…this,”

A dagger to the back couldn’t have hurt her any deeper. Jim’s transformations had taken so much from him already and now he couldn’t even…

Barbara was keenly aware of the magazine on the ground behind her, blazing like a hot coal from just beyond her vision.

In that moment she vowed that she would chase down whatever possible leads this new discovery offered her. Run to the ends of the earth, leave no stone unturned. Do whatever it takes to find a cure. Barbara would find a way for her son to live a normal life, with all that entailed.

No matter how many decades it took.

“Thank you for telling me,”

Jim managed to crack a smile before going back to his candy corn.

Finally able to relax, they settled in to just enjoy the rest of the night and each other’s company, accompanied by the soft glow and crackles from the dying fire. The hour slips away, Barbara finishes her tea and Jim polishes off his candy corn and eats the bag to.

Eventually Barbara stood up from her chair “I’m going to bed, be sure to take care of the fire before you go to sleep,”

Jim yawned and stretched “I think I’m gonna turn in to,”

Barbara raised an eyebrow “Aren’t you still hungry?”

“Nah,” Jim appeared to only be half listening while he spread the coals around with the stick.

She frowned, glancing at the crumbs of orange sugar on the ground. Even by his night-food standards that wasn’t a very nutritious meal “You should have more to eat than just candy,”

“It’s ok, I ate earlier,”

She looked over at their cooler full of food stores, all of it untouched “What did you eat?”

Jim fidgeted and looked away while pouring their used dishwater over the glowing ashes “I…uh…a fox,”

“A fox?”

“Yeah…I saw it on my walk…it was dead when I found it…so I figured why not,”

Her blood ran cold “Do you have any idea how it might have died?”

“Old age?”

Barbara slowly walked over and grabbed the electric lantern, now that the fire was out they needed the extra light to see each other “How long ago did you eat it?”

“About two hours ago?” Jim’s voice was small, some of her anxiety starting to leech into him.

Two hours. Which meant it was probably too late to make him vomit it out.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

Barbara took a deep breath and willed herself to stay calm. The were in the middle of the woods miles away from any kind of civilization; panicking wouldn’t do either of them a damn bit of good right now “That fox might have died from a disease, like tularemia or bru--”

“Or rabies…” Jim finished, blue face growing pale in the lantern light.

Barbara grimaced, her thoughts exactly, she’d wanted to avoid scaring him by saying so out loud but it looked like he’d put it together himself “It’s ok, it’s only two hours back to the rental place and one to the nearest town big enough to have what we need. We can just say a fox bit you, that should get you all the shots you need. If we get up at six we can get there before ten,,”

Barbara walked over to Jim and squeezed both of his shoulders “Don’t

worry,I've seen rabies exposure cases before, people have received their initial rabies shots almost 24 hours after they've been bitten and made complete recoveries. Ten am tomorrow is plenty early enough,"

Even if she was battling her own fears Jim needed to hear those words from her right now.

She managed to smile and pat him on the cheek "You're going to be fine,"

His expression wavered before solidifying into enforced composure, he nodded back at her.

With that they separated and set about preparing to retire for the night, despite the fresh undercurrent of panic.

Soon pajamas were on, teeth were brushed, and the lantern was out; the only light coming from the small flashlight she held. And once Jim was bundled up on his tarp and Barbara was cocooned in her tent that was extinguished too. She shut her eyes and settled into the sleeping bag, determined to get a full night's rest.

Barbara was just starting to nod off when she heard Jim whisper from outside.

"Are you still awake mom?"

"Yeah," she replied with a yawn "What is it hon?"

“We’re going to tell the clinic that an animal bit me and that’s why I need the shots, right?”

“Uh huh,”

“Then…won’t it look weird if I don’t have any bite wounds on me?”

Her eyes shot open.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay getting this one up, but y'all have NO idea how long I've been waiting to drop this part, and I wanted to make sure the quality was up to snuff.

And to those who are wondering, yes the fox Jim ate had rabies, but the virus was incompatible with his troll physiology so it fizzled out to nothing by the time the sun rises in the morning, but Barbara and Jim have no way of knowing this. So tough break for them.

Will there be repercussions from all of this? You'd better believe it.

Coming ideally on April 3rd, Jim loses track of time.

Toby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The squeak rubber on linoleum got louder as the footsteps came closer.

Toby didn't move an inch, eyes locked on the gap beneath the stall door.

Coach Lawrence's sneakers stepped into view.

The muscles in his legs were wailing in protest, cramped in position to keep him perched on top of the toilet. Toby forced himself to ignore the pain and held his breath, staying as still as he possibly could. They were close, so close, he couldn't mess things up now.

They hadn't come this far just to trip at the finish line.

Seconds ticked by, each one feeling like an hour, before Coach Lawrence's shoes turned and headed out of the bathroom. Toby letting out a silent cheer of victory as the door shut behind him. He waited a few more moments, just to make sure Coach Lawrence wasn't trying to fake them out, before dropping down to the floor and peeking out of the stall.

"Coast is clear Jim,"

Right on queue Jim stepped out of another stall and hurried over to meet him by the door. A quick glance to make sure the halls were

clear, then they made a break for it. Running through the school as silently as they could, taking care to make sure they wouldn't be seen.

When they reached the side entrance Toby was shaking, half from excitement and half from fear. Part of him was convinced that Señor Uhl was going to be standing right outside waiting for them, two detention slips held at the ready. Their adventure over before it could even begin. Palms sweaty, he slowly pushed the door open, when he saw that the walkway was clear his heart leapt.

He and Jim ran down the sidewalk, grabbed their bikes, and started pedaling like their lives depended on it. Not even slowing down when they crossed the street and cut through the intersection. When they finally stopped, huffing and puffing in front of the diner's parking lot, only a sliver of Arcadia Oaks High school was visible, the rest concealed by buildings.

Toby felt giddy energy bubbling up inside his chest. They had done it, for a while he didn't think he had it in him but he had pulled through.

Now the afternoon was theirs.

" *Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh* I can't believe we just did that!" he hopped from foot to foot, practically jumping with exhilaration "We ditched a pep rally *and* snuck out of school we're practically delinquents now! And no one suspects a thing! Oooh man if anyone finds out we're going to get Saturday detention for the rest of the year!"

Jim was giggling and grinning from ear to ear, if anything he was even more buzzed about this than Toby was "Who cares, detention will be worth it!"

Toby gave Jim an admiring glance, he had always been so straight-laced since...well, ever. It really felt good to see him *finally* cut loose.

At that moment the girls rounded the corner on their bikes, racing towards their designated meeting spot right on time.

Jim waved them over as the three slid to a stop, panting as they caught their breath.

“You guys have any trouble escaping?”

Mary leaned heavily against her handlebars, still gasping from exertion “We nearly got caught, Ms. Janeth almost found us, we had to hide in the recycling bins,”

She perked up almost instantly “But we got away, now we have the rest of the afternoon off, and you know what that means!”

Like Toby needed to be told twice “Gun Robot 7 here we come!” he cheered, playfully bumping shoulders with Jim.

Immediately Jim stiffened, a slow shudder making its way up through his body “Tobes,” he hissed through clenched teeth “...arm…”

Oh...oops.

“Sorry dude,” he scooted away, giving Jim plenty of space “Forgot

about your needle arm, at least you're done now, right?"

"Yeah, just finished the last round of shots yesterday," Jim replied while rubbing his much punctured limb "Thank god, if I had to get jabbed one more time I think my arm would have fallen off,"

Darci snickered "It is kind of funny that the shots you had to get after are worse than when the fox actually tried to bite your foot off,"

"Yeah, hilarious,"

Toby noticed how Jim kept rubbing his arm as the five of them walked their bikes over to the movie theatre, there was a crackdown on sidewalk laws and they didn't need to get busted for that of all things.

It was nuts how Jim and Dr. Lake had been going on camping trips for years without any trouble, and then all of a sudden the most crazy-town-banana-pants thing happens.

Jim was still pretty touchy about it, he'd only ever showed Toby the injury under the bandage once. A cluster of thin red lines an inch above his ankle, not nearly as gorey as Toby had been imagining. He really didn't like talking about it though, which was cool, Toby knew when to back off. But after enough time had passed and Jim had gotten over almost being mauled, Toby was going to try and convince him to show off the scars more.

Scars were a huge chick magnet.

Soon enough the theatre was in sight. Not wanting to miss the start of

the movie, they hurried to secure their bikes and buy their tickets. Ten minutes and three giant tubs of popcorn later they were all sitting back and watching the pure epicness of *Gun Robot 7: Revenge of the Federation* .

The movie was well over two hours long, but they managed to sit through every last glorious, action packed minute of it. Except for Mary who managed a quick potty break during one of the chase scenes.

In other words a lot better than the pep rally would have been. They should do this more often.

All too soon the credits started rolling, forcing them to gather their trash and head for the door so that broom wielding employees could do their thing.

While throwing they were all throwing their trash away, Toby happened to notice Claire looking thoughtfully at the banner advertising another movie two theatres down.

Her pensive look broke into a wide, cheshire-like smile “What do you guys say about making this a double feature?”

Toby did a double take at her words, before shooting a discreet glance at the nearby theater employees. One behind the ticket counter trying to pretend he wasn’t reading a textbook and fooling nobody. Two at the snack bar engaged in a heated debate about the Star Wars prequels.

None of them would notice or care if five teens snuck into an extra movie.

For the first time today Toby didn't feel one hundred percent onboard with this. Ditching during a pep rally was one thing, but theatre hopping was another. Forget grounding, if they got caught it was game over for real. Darci's dad might even pull strings to get them all sent to juvie.

This was stupid, crazy, if there was a single brain cell between the five of them they'd quit while they were ahead and just go to Claire's house and play videogames.

But that wouldn't be nearly as fun, or as thrilling.

Mary was practically vibrating "We *totally* should!"

"We've already cut school for half a day," Darci said with a shrug and a smirk "What's sneaking an extra movie?"

Toby was about to say that they could count him in when something occurred to him.

He glanced at Jim from the corner of his eye, trying to gauge his reaction without being completely obvious.

The movie they were looking at was over two hours long, which would mean for Jim to stay and watch with them he would have to break curfew.

Toby had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from saying anything, Jim needed to make this choice by himself, pushing him one way or

another never ended well.

Jim always stuck to his mom's rules, which was one of the things Toby admired about him. But Dr. Lake still made him follow the same rules they'd had back since elementary school. They were in *high school* now, they were teenagers for crying out loud. Trenchcoat wearing strangers weren't going to throw them in a windowless van if they were out on the sidewalk five minutes past dark.

And Toby was sure that if Jim would just let himself relax and forget about the rules just once, he would realize that to. Then he could spend his nights going out and having fun with Toby and their three awesome new friends instead of being cooped up inside. Sure Dr. Lake would probably be a little upset at first, but Toby was confident that she would understand eventually.

But was today the day?

He held his breath as Jim opened his mouth "I'm in to," his smile was giddy and carefree "What about you Tobes?"

Bliss shot through him from his head to his shoes.

Hearing Jim say that made Toby feel like he was walking on air. It was all he could do to not grab Jim in a bear hug and sweep him off his feet "As if you guys even have to ask me,"

After making a couple bathroom trips as stealthily as possible, the five of them quivering with barely restrained giggles, they scurried into a second theatre. One showing a cheesy romcom that they most certainly had not bought tickets for.

The movie was nothing they hadn't seen before in other similar films. Completely predictable with cliche miscommunications and an obligatory love triangle, but they were all still roaring with laughter. Not so much at the movie, but at the thrill of successfully having broken multiple rules in a single day and gotten away with it.

So another two hours later they were all still laughing their heads off as they walked out of the theatre.

"We, we--" Darci's words were broken up by loud guffaws "Should ditch and do movies more often,"

"Totally,"

"Definitely,"

"No argument here,"

Toby sided up to Jim, making sure to avoid his needle arm this time, and flashed him a wink. He knew Jim had it in him, that one day he would realize sticking to old, outdated, frankly babyish rules wasn't as important as spending time with his friends, he just had to give Jim the chance to figure that out by himself.

"Glad you decided to stay later this time Jimbo,"

"What?"

"Dr. Lake probably won't be too mad at you for breaking curfew, just

make her some of your famous spinach puffs and she'll get over it,"

Jim stopped in his tracks and turned to look at him, confusion written all over his face "What are you talking about? It's only three, I'll be home in plenty of time,"

"No dude, it's four thirty,"

Wait. Had Jim not been planning on this? Had he just...forgotten the time?

Frown deepening, Jim rooted through his pocket and pulled out his phone "It can't be that la-"

He stopped in his tracks, jaw dropping open. Toby could actually see the color draining from his face as Jim saw that it was indeed 4:27 pm.

Just like that the cheerful mood was gone. The waves shock and panic coming off of Jim strong enough to make it crash to the ground. Quickly picking up on the sudden shift in atmosphere, girls all looked at each other uncomfortably, Claire coming up to Jim and gently laying a hand on his shoulder "Don't worry, I've broken curfew a few times, your mom might be mad but it's n--"

Without warning Jim turned and sprinted towards the entrance. They all just stood there, dumbfounded, for a few moments before speedily following him.

Outside Jim was frantically trying to unlock his bike, his hands were trembling so badly that the lock and key slipped from his grip

multiple times.

“Hey, where’s the fire?” Darci’s tone was light, but her question landed awkwardly.

Toby’s could feel his face growing hot. Whether it was anger, embarrassment, or some unholy combination of both he had no idea.

Why did Jim have to do this? Today of all freaking days. They had been having so much fun and then he had to go and ruin it.

Why couldn’t Jim just not do what his mom told him for once in his life?

He stepped up to him, prepared to say whatever he had to to get Jim to forget his dumb curfew and actually put his friends first for once.

At that moment Jim finally ripped his bike free and mounted it. Looking back just long enough to flash them an apologetic look.

“Sorry but I really need to leave right now,” he said in a shaking voice.

“Jim wa-” Mary shouted at him but it was too late, Jim was already speeding away, he hadn’t even bothered to put his helmet on.

Expression flickering back and forth between fury and confusion, she grabbed her own bike and took off hot on his trail. Claire, Darci, and Toby rushing to get their own bikes and follow after them.

The four of them pedaled as fast as they could after Jim. Darci nearly got close enough to touch him a few times, but they couldn't keep pace with the almost manic way Jim was pedaling. In ten minutes, a time frame Toby never before thought possible, they pulled into their cul-de-sac.

Jim didn't even slow down, dismounting and discarding his bike on the lawn without missing a beat, and then running for his front door at a breakneck pace.

Toby braked hard on the sidewalk "Hold on Jim, let's ju--"

Jim vanished as the front door slammed shut with a resounding thud. Toby's entire face was burning, he was very *very* aware of the girls huddling up on the sidewalk and exchanging hushed whispers.

This was bad, this was bad, this was so freaking bad.

Toby didn't care if he had to drag him, he was getting Jim out here.

Blood pumping hot and furious, Toby jogged up and pounded on the door.

No reply.

He was hyper aware of the girls eyes on him now "C'mon Jim open up," he forced his tone to be light and friendly "You can't just leave us hanging like this,"

Still nothing.

Clenching his fist, Toby tried again.

On the fifth knocking attempt the doorknob started to turn. Toby opened his mouth to unload on Jim about his uncool and uncalled for attitude, but to his surprise it was Dr. Lake that answered the door instead.

“What is it Toby?”

He stretched his fake smile even wider, if there was ever a time to play it cool it was now “Hey there Dr. L, I know Jim has a curfew to stick to...but would it be ok if he just came out so we could say goodbye for the night?”

“Jim is in for the night, you guys can talk tomorrow,”

“Oh,” Toby thought quickly “How about I just pop in really quick, just for a minute,”

He moved to step around her and go talk to Jim himself, but before he could set foot inside her arm shot out and grabbed the door frame.

Her expression had shifted from calm to annoyed as she stood firmly in the doorway, hand fixed firmly to the wooden frame beside her.

Barring him entry.

“I’m sorry Toby but Jim can’t talk right now,”

Unwilling to move but able to go forward, Toby stayed where he was, feet rooted to the ground.

That was when Claire came hurrying up from behind him, Mary and Darci right on her heels “Please don’t be mad, Jim wasn’t trying to break curfew, we all lost track of time,”

“That isn’t--” Dr. Lake let out a deep sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I’m not mad,” she said tonelessly “But Jim still can’t come to the door,”

Mary’s eyes narrowed, mouth twisting into an indignant frown “Why not?”

“He…he needs to get started on his homework,”

“We won’t take long,” Darci piped up “And besides, the only thing due tomorrow is the biology worksheet, and I know Jim’s finished it already,”

Suddenly a strange sound came from deeper in the house behind Dr. Lake, it almost sounded like…fabric ripping?

Instinctively all four of them shifted around to get a look at the source of the noise. Dr. Lake grabbed the door handle and started to ease it shut while still blocking them.

“I-- I’m sorry but the answer is still no,”

Toby felt sick. Could today get any worse? Why did Dr. Lake have to do it like this. He already knew Mary was going to give them hell about this, not to mention what Claire and Darci would think “But Dr. Lake--”

“Goodnight,” with that she shut the door firmly in their faces

They all stood there for a few seconds of awkward silence before starting to shuffle toward their bikes.

“What does she mean ‘Goodnight’?” Mary grumbled “It’s still light out...”

Toby moved to follow them, paused, and then turned back and stepped toward the door. Jim always had lots of weird rules to follow, but this was the first time he’d broken one of them and gotten caught.

But Dr. Lake hadn’t been mad, the way she had acted was...weird.

On impulse he tried the knob.

Deadbolted.

His entire body ignited in a hot flush of embarrassment. They had just missed curfew by half an hour and Dr. Lake was locking them out like they were just some random punks?

Any sense of shame gone now, Toby stepped right up and pressed his ear against the wood.

At first he couldn't hear anything, then he started to pick up the whispers. Toby pressed closer, most of it was too quiet to make out, but some of it wasn't.

"What were you thinking?" Dr. Lake's voice "I must have called you over a dozen times!"

The volume died down abruptly. Toby strained to hear more, the silence ticking on.

Then her voice shot up in a sharp peak, nearly forcing him to stagger back.

"Do you have any idea how close you were cutting it!"

After that it got really quiet.

For a while he thought that was the end of it, then Dr. Lake spoke up again, this time so soft he could barely hear her "Oh sweetie I'm sorry…stay here, I'll get the scissors,"

Toby kept listening but things stayed quiet. Except for the hundreds of questions swirling in his skull.

He raised a fist, ready to rap it against the wood. To knock on the door one more time today.

His hand stayed like that, raised and ready for action, for five seconds, ten, twenty, thirty.

Then at forty he deflated, hand falling softly and soundlessly against the wood. Hanging his head, Toby turned and walked away from the house, back towards the sidewalk where his bike and the girls were waiting.

Chapter End Notes

> According to the sources I've looked up, sunset in California in late November happens around 4:40pm. Jim's set curfew was 4:00pm and by the time he got out of the movie it was T-minus fifteen minutes until he changed. With a ten minute bike ride home he literally made it by less than five minutes until transformation time.
>
> I don't know what experiences other people had, but at my high school pep rallys happened during the last few periods of the day and after they ended students were release for the day. Where I went it was really common for students to just ditch pep rallys and essentially get a half day off of school. Teachers would stop you from leaving once they began herding students towards the gym, but no one who successfully ditched was ever punished. I even had one teacher the period right before a pep rally was scheduled to start, discreetly release us ten minutes early so we could get off the school grounds before they started rounding up all the students. I don't know if my school was unique in this way, but it was a huge part of the student culture while I was there.
>
> Tentative update date May 1st, when Claire gets some surprising news.

Claire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire's eyelids fluttered open. Rapidly blinking to bring the dark room into focus. Which was definitely way too dark for it to be time to get up.

She rolled over and glanced towards her alarm clock, trying to focus on the glowing, green numbers with still bleary eyes.

3:47am

Claire groaned and squeezed her eyes shut, pressing her cheek deeper into her pillow in an attempt to go back to sleep. Which given her track record, probably wasn't going to happen.

Why had she even woken up in the first place? There were no loud sounds or bright lights. She wasn't in any discomfort and didn't have to go to the bathroom. So why was--

Muffled noises came from down the hall.

She froze underneath the covers, not even daring to breathe. All thoughts of going back to sleep vanishing as her heartbeat skyrocketed.

Had she really just heard that, not just imagined it? That was probably it, Claire probably just heard the house settling and her sleepy brain ran with it. There was no way it could be something...else.

Just then the noises came again, removing any possibility of them being imagined. Not moving an inch from where she was, Claire tried to discern exactly what exactly the strange noises were. They didn't sound like a home invader, but they didn't sound like one of her parents just getting a glass of water either.

After debating with herself for a solid minute, Claire peeled the sheets away and sat up. Slinking out of bed, she cautiously crept out of her room and down the hall, willing the frantic thrumming of her heart to slow.

If it turned out to be one of her parents that would be that, but if it wasn't she would run back to her room, lock the door, and call the cops.

Easy peasy….in theory.

By now she could hear well enough to tell that the noises were coming from the bathroom, and as Claire tiptoed closer the sounds got clearer. Shuffles and clanks, someone hacking and gasping, someone she knew.

Her mom.

Claire practically melted with relief at once she realized that the sound wasn't some psychotic burglar. Almost immediately the feeling was replaced with stomach curdling dread as the horrible sounding coughs continued.

She knocked gently on the bathroom door "Mom?"

No reply, the moans and strangled gasps continued uninterrupted.

Insides knotted with anxiety, Claire eased open the door to reveal her mom slumped on the bathroom floor in front of the toilet, clinging to the porcelain bowl like a life preserver. She turned in response to the door opening, eyes weary and unfocused, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand “wuh, Claire? What are--”

Her cheeks bulged and she hastily turned back towards the toilet, groaning miserably as her stomach forcefully emptied its contents again.

Claire rushed to her mother’s side “What’s wrong, are you sick? Should I get Dad?”

“I--” she coughed, a horrible hacking sound “I’m fine, your father went out to get me some medicine, go back to bed,”

Claire made no attempt to move, she stayed firmly in place kneeling on the floor and holding Ophelia’s hair as she continued to vomit.

The sharp terror from a minute ago of their home potentially being intruded upon by a dangerous outsider had been replaced by a softer, more insidious fear.

If her mom was fine why was she puking her guts out at three in the morning? That wasn’t something people who were ‘fine’ did. So yeah, fat chance of Claire going back to bed.

Despite Ophelia's continued weak objections. Claire stayed by her side until she was finished heaving. When Ophelia once again insisted that she was alright and that Claire should go back to sleep she responded by gently leading her downstairs to the couch and covering her with a blanket.

Ophelia had given up protesting by then, eyes fluttering shut as she clutched her stomach and leaned back against the couch cushion.

Claire twisted the cloth of her pajama top with her hands, fabric balled between trembling fingers. Why wasn't her mom giving her a harder time about this? Why was she lying back and not fighting her at all? Where was the tough-as-nails politician that ruled the household schedule with an iron fist?

Just how sick was her mom?

Seeing her mom slumped back against the couch, stray locks of hair pasted to her sweaty, pale skin; Claire felt smaller than she had in a long time.

Claire shook her head and shoved her nagging fears down as far as she could. This was no time to be freezing up, now was the time to *do* something. She could panic later, her mom was sick and needed help *now* .

Running into the kitchen, Claire started up the water, grabbed a mug, and popped in a lemon teabag. In less than five minutes she had a steaming cup of lemon tea.

Hurrying over to Ophelia, Claire set the mug down in front of her "I made tea do you want some?"

Ophelia blinked sluggishly “No...no thank you,” she said in a soft voice.

Claire bit her lip, her mom had just thrown up a lot and probably needed fluids, but she had said no and she shouldn’t undercut that.

In the end Claire left the tea where it was just in case her mom changed her mind and scurried back to the kitchen. A bundle of nervous energy with nowhere to go, she fluttered around the pantry until she landed on a box of saltines and jogged back to the couch.

“Maybe try chewing on some of these, that should help with your stomach,”

Apparently this had been the wrong thing to say.

The corners of Ophelia’s mouth turned down into an irritated frown, lifting her head just enough to deliver a stern glare “Claire I’m *fine* , I just need to rest, I don’t need you fussing over me,”

Claire slowly lowered the box of saltines, cheeks burning.

Of course. Why hadn’t she realized sooner? Her mom had been puking her guts out less than five minutes ago, of course she didn’t feel like eating anything. Of course she was feeling sick and miserable, of course she didn’t want Claire buzzing around and throwing tea and crackers at her.

Flushed with shame, Claire tucked the saltines under her arm, picked

up the tea, and slunk back into the kitchen.

One thing was clear, her mom needed peace and quiet, hopefully Claire could do *that* right at least.

She took a seat at the kitchen table and ended up sipping the lemon tea herself. Occasionally throwing worried glances towards where her mom was resting.

The urge to fix this, to do something to help, to make things better, was almost overwhelming. Her mom was sick, really sick, and Claire was just sitting around having tea. But what the hell did she know about what her mom needed? Maybe lemon tea and saltines would make whatever she had worse. Maybe the best thing to do would be to stay out of the way until her dad came back with actual medicine.

Her eyes started to burn despite how much she was trying to fight it.

Maybe Claire didn't know the first thing about helping sick people. But she couldn't just sit back and do nothing.

Not when it was her mom.

After nearly ten minutes of going back and forth Claire ended up making another cup of tea, ginger this time, which she knew was one of her mom's favorites.

She timidly stepped back into the living room, hands clasped tightly around the fresh cup of tea. Just go up and very calmly and quietly offer the tea again. And if her mom said no she would leave right away and not disrupt her resting.

“I made some ginger tea,” Claire said gently while walking up to the couch “You like ginger right?”

Ophelia blinked and leaned forward, hands outstretched to accept the mug, even those small movements appeared to take all the effort she had “Thank you mija, that sounds good,”

Elation shot through her as she handed over the warm ceramic mug. A massive weight was lifted off her shoulders as Claire *finally* felt like she was doing something to help.

She was about to retreat to the kitchen so not to hover, when her mom spoke up again.

“Claire, if you don’t mind, could you sit up with me?” Ophelia flashed her a weak smile “Some company sounds good right now,”

A hot, fluttery feeling swept through her body, something between relief and joy “Of course Mom,”

Claire sat back in the easy chair. She stayed quiet to keep from stressing her mom out any more, but kept her eyes locked on her. Carefully watching for any further signs of illness while her mom took tiny sips of tea.

Twenty minutes later and half an hour after Claire had woken up her dad came home.

“Sorry I took so long,” he shut and locked the door with one hand

while carrying a plastic grocery bag in the other “The CVS was closed so I had to drive all the way to-- Claire? What are you doing up?”

Claire shot up out of her seat, eyes locked on the bag “You have medicine, right? Will it be enough? Do we need to go to the hospital?”

“Slow down Claire,” Javier walked over to the couch and sat down beside his wife, handing her the bag “We’re not going to the hospital, this is just to help with your mother’s nausea,”

“Buh...but, why are you nauseous? You were really sick, why aren’t we going to the hospital!?”

Ophelia and Javier shared a conspiratorial look.

She knew that look.

There was something they knew that she didn’t.

“What’s going on, please, tell me!” her voice was practically a whine by now but she didn’t care, her mom was sick and Claire needed to know how bad it was.

They were both silent for a few seconds. Then Ophelia gingerly set the bag and mug off to the side before clearing her throat “Claire, we’re pretty sure that this is...morning sickness,”

Claire’s eyebrows knitted together in confusion. Morning sickness? But that’s what people had when they were--

Oh.

Oh.

She flopped back into her seat, brain too busy shifting gears to control her body right now. Ophelia was still talking but Claire was only half listening.

It was a massive relief to hear that her mom wasn't dying from some horrible stomach disease, but the fact that she had been throwing up because…

That was a lot to wrap her head around, to say the least.

"…now it's still pretty early and there's a lot we don't know for sure, so please don't go around telling everyone, ok?"

Enough of her brain was still functioning that Claire managed to nod in response.

"We expect the morning sickness to go away soon, but I have an OBGyn appointment next Tuesday. If there are any issues we'll catch them," Ophelia leaned forward and flashed Claire a rare, relaxed smile "I'm ok mija,"

Somehow Claire found herself smiling back.

Claire waved goodbye as her father's SUV pulled away from the school.

It felt strange that even when her day started with waking up to the sound of her mom projectile vomiting and learning she wasn't going to be an only child for much longer it still brought her to the front of the school, ready for another day of lectures and studying. Same as always.

Despite everything calming down no one had gone back to sleep. They'd all stayed up and talked, mostly about the new little brother or sister she would be getting in eight months. Her dad had taken advantage of being up early to cook them all an extra large breakfast.

Even if her mom had only been able to eat a few spoonfuls of the oatmeal.

Quite frankly Claire was still figuring out how she felt about getting a sibling. Mainly she was just glad that her mom was ok.

Car vanishing around the corner, Claire turned and headed into the school building.

Her mom had always been pretty strict, and her dad was right up there with her. Claire would be the first to admit that she wished they would lighten up every once and awhile. But seeing her mom so sick that she'd barely been able to stand was...scary.

A hot flicker of guilt briefly flared in her chest as she reached her locker and started spinning in the combination. Her parents weren't perfect by any means, in fact Claire had a whole mental list of things

she wished they'd do differently. But she knew from the bottom of her heart that they loved her, and if push came to shove, either one of them would take a bullet for her.

Not everyone was lucky enough to have parents like that.

Out of the corner of her eye Claire spotted Jim and Toby at their lockers, causing her chest to tighten with an entirely different emotion.

Once in middle school Claire had pulled a chair out from under another girl, she'd gotten written up and the teacher had called her parents. She very clearly remembered sitting in the principal's office, absolutely petrified of what punishment her parents would dish out when they got there.

But whatever that punishment was, being grounded for two weeks as it turned out, she'd been scared of *it* , not of her parents.

Lips pursed, Claire watched Jim and Toby head off to their first class.

Yesterday, after the movies, Jim hadn't just been acting nervous about being punished or grounded.

He had been scared.

Scared for real.

Claire liked Jim. She liked being his friend and for a long time she

wanted to be more than that. But every time she came close to taking that step, every time she thought about asking him out or confessing her feelings, she stopped. Some nameless instinct holding her back.

So she stayed quiet, and waited.

For months Claire had struggled with her feelings, holding back and biting her tongue without ever being able to put her finger on the reason why.

But now she knew.

Claire made her way over to where Mary and Darci were waiting in their usual rendezvous spot.

“Hey guys…”

Both of them looked towards her, but it was Darci who responded.

“Morning Claire,” she paused, noticing the troubled expression on her friend’s face “Hey, is something going on?”

Claire took a deep breath, maybe she was just being paranoid, reading too much into things. But she had to ask “You remember yesterday, after the movies?”

Darci winced while Mary just snorted “Yeah, that’s pretty hard to forget,”

“The way Jim freaked out and the way his mom was acting…” Claire bit her lip, hesitating for a moment before taking the leap “That wasn’t…I don’t think everything’s ok with them, do you guys think so to?”

As soon as the words left her mouth Mary’s expression turned hard as stone “You’re damn right I do, something’s definitely going on,”

Darci’s wince deepened, based on her expression she already knew where this was leading to and she didn’t like it “Yeah, I think he was worried about a lot more than breaking curfew,”

“So what should we do?”

Things were silent for a few moments before Mary spoke up, voice flinty “We all need to have a *talk* ,”

Chapter End Notes

> Ophelia might have seemed snippier than usual during parts of this chapter, especially considering Claire was scared and only trying to help, but that's because Ophelia was incredibly sick, miserable, and grouchy. As someone who's had food poisoning on no fewer than three occasions, sometimes the only thing that even remotely appeals to me after marathon vomiting is sitting quietly in the dark and slowly letting my intestines untangle themselves. And during that time I'm not in the mood for anyone's company, well intentioned or not.
>
> To fill in the blanks Ophelia instantly regretted snapping at Claire, something to the tune of 'You're the adult, it doesn't matter how sick you are, how dare you lose control of yourself and act that way to your child when she's only trying to help you'. Which

is why she was much more receptive the next time Claire came around, she didn't really want the tea or for someone to sit up with her, she wanted to reassure Claire that her presence and efforts were appreciated.

And now we've officially passed the point where the girls can just explain things away, it's only going to snowball from here. The next chapter's going to be the calm before the storm, but in the one after that...let's just say the point of no return is crossed.

Target update date May 22: The girls confront Toby and while Jim's back isn't to the wall yet, it's inches away and getting closer.

Toby and Jim

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toby yanked the door open and ran into the locker room.

Please be there, please be there, please be there.

He made a beeline for the laundry bin and practically dived in head first, frantically rooting through the used towels and uniforms. Two thirds of the way in his fingers closed around the object he was looking for. He went limp with relief before quickly realizing that was a bad idea when he was upside down in a laundry bin; which smelled like low tide on the world's nastiest beach now that he noticed, and squirmed out. Talk about a lucky break. Toby had been *that* close to losing his wallet over thanksgiving.

Familiar leather rectangle now tucked safely in his back pocket, Toby started to leave when he heard something from the shower area. Curious, he took a few steps closer.

Someone was talking, based on the pauses between their words they were probably on their phone, but it wasn't just any someone; it was Steve "Bane of Toby's entire existence," Palchuk.

Toby paused, one foot still frozen in mid-step. Normally he'd be running toward the other side of school right now, but something in Steve's voice sounded...off.

Maybe he was risking his life and the integrity of his face by hanging around, but the potential for dirt on Steve was just too good to pass

up. Squashing down his survival instincts, Toby crept closer, pressing his back against the wall and sliding up to the shower area until he could hear Steve's voice crystal clear.

"I-- I know you're busy, with work and important stuff-- but these are the semi finals," his voice cracked "This is one of the biggest basketball games of the season…"

Toby held his breath and stayed as still as he could. That wasn't puberty cracking in Steve's voice, it was *emotional* cracking. Steve was upset-- no, more than that, it sounded like Steve was two seconds away from bursting into tears.

"Please Dad," Steve's voice was quivering so much he was practically whimpering now "I...I really want you to see me play,"

His voice died down, probably because his dad was saying something on the other end of the phone.

Things were silent for the longest time. Then Toby heard the click of a button and the soft rustling fabric as Steve hung up and slid the phone back into his pocket without saying a word.

Just a sniffle.

Toby couldn't help but wince sympathetically. Everyone already knew about the divorce, Steve had straight up announced it to the entire class back in eighth grade, but this was something new. And it was no wonder he kept it to himself. Steve might have been his least favorite person on the planet and a world class asshole, but even he didn't deserve to get jerked around by a deadbeat dad.

Nobody deserved that.

He shook his head, he could feel bad for Steve later, now he needed to get out of here before Steve saw him and turned him into literal mincemeat.

Toby turned to walk away, only to trip on a mop propped up against the lockers. He looked on in horror as the mop seemed to fall in slow motion, handle landing on the tile floor with a deafening clatter.

“ *Who’s there!* ” Steve roared from around the corner.

Oh *fuck* .

Toby could actually feel his heart shoot straight up into his throat.

No time to run, had to think of something quick.

Blood rushing in his ears, Toby quickly darted around and grabbed the mop with shaking hands, dragging it several feet closer to the door. He gently set it back down on the floor and shot back upright just as a furious looking Steve rounded the corner.

He forced himself to act casual despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins “Hey Steve, what--”

Steve charged and grabbed the front of his shirt, slamming him up against the brick wall “*What did you hear!*”

A trickle of sweat ran down the back of his neck “Hear-- what? I didn’t hear anything, I just walked in when you--”

The grip on his sweater vest tightened, Steve’s snarling face was inches away from his own “Don’t play dumb with me *Dumb*zalski,”

Toby held his breath, shoulders pressing into the gritty brick wall. No way to run. And if Steve even suspected he’d overheard he was dead. Like legit dead, as in Steve was going to kill him and throw his body in the laundry bin. The only thing to do was continue to pretend he’d just walked in. But knowing Steve he wasn’t just going to let him off the hook that easy.

All of a sudden it came to him. The perfect out.

Toby snorted and rolled his eyes, doing his best to come off as annoyed rather than nervous “Oh my god it’s the twenty first century Steve, if you and Hank want to make out just do it under the bleachers with everyone else,”

Just like magic the furious look on Steve’s face melted into a brief expression of relief, before he quickly adjusted it into a look of annoyed apathy. And when his grip on Toby’s sweater vest loosened and he knew he was in the clear.

Toby knew Steve, and he knew that if he accused Steve of swapping spit with another guy, he wouldn’t suspect Toby had overheard his real secret. Steve didn’t believe in pulling punches, and if the roles had been reversed Steve would have thrown Toby’s deepest, darkest secrets back at him without hesitation.

Bottom line, Steve would much rather have people question whether or not he was gay than have anyone learn that he was crying in the locker room because his daddy couldn't come to his game.

So he could tell Steve was more grateful than angry.

But not enough to stop him from punching Toby in the face.

His head snapped to the side. Toby dropped to the ground with a grunt as sharp pain radiated through his jaw.

"Stay out of my way *Tubby* ! You and that crybaby Lake!" with that Steve turned and left, leaving Toby to pick himself off the locker room floor.

Wincing, he staggered to the door and began making his way to the library.

He prodded the bruised area with his tongue, trying to survey the damage.

His heart plummeted when he felt loose bits of metal, mumbling several words that would've had Nana make him put money in the swear jar.

Toby liked to consider himself a reasonably forgiving person, if it had just been bruises he would have probably kept Steve's secret to himself. But mess with the braces and the gloves came off.

Dr. Muelas might be his mortal nemesis, but even he never charged for repairs when his braces got damaged. The issue was time. Every little error took that much longer to correct and get back on track. And judging by the amount of metal floating around in his mouth right now, this was going to take weeks to fix if he was lucky.

Months more likely.

So yeah, he was definitely telling people about Steve's daddy issues.

Toby was still grumbling to himself when he made his way into the library and found the table their group had decided to set up shop at. Classes had ended for the day, but their pre finals cramming session was just getting started.

Darci was the first one to notice him "Hey Toby we-- Why are you holding your face like that?"

"Now *that* is an interesting story," Toby slid into his seat and pried his hand off his jaw with a wince "You guys are never going to believe what I just…"

He trailed off, noticing for the first time that they were down one person.

"Hey, where's Jim?"

No one rushed to speak up. The girls all glanced at each other and shared a look in a way that made Toby a little uncomfortable.

It was Claire who ended up answering “We asked him to pick up smoothies from across the street,”

“Oh...you got a smoothie craving?”

“Not exactly,” Mary said, folding her arms across her chest, shoulders squared and head held high “Mainly we wanted to be able to talk to you alone for a bit,”

Right away Toby knew something was up. He recognized that look, that was business-Mary, and business-Mary only came out when something serious was going down “You what?”

Claire let out a deep breath and laid both hands palms down on the table “We need to talk, about yesterday,”

Toby grimaced.

Oh. *That* .

“Yeah, sorry, Dr. L has always been pretty strict about rules,”

“Uh, that wasn’t strict,” Mary said, voice dripping with contempt “That was full on psycho,”

Claire quickly reached out and grabbed Mary’s shoulder “Not helping,” she hissed.

Toby felt a pang of defensiveness “Hey, Dr. Lake might be a bit…overprotective, but she’s cool,”

Darci cleared her throat, causing everyone to turn in her direction “Toby, I’ve seen strict, I’ve seen protective, *my dad* could probably write a book about being strict and overprotective. But the way Dr. Lake acted yesterday was pretty unusual,”

“She…was…probably just tired from work,”

Mary opened her mouth but was held off from saying anything by Claire holding up a hand “Let’s start from the beginning,” Claire shifted her chair so she was now directly facing Toby “You’ve known Jim since you guys were five, right?”

“Yeah,”

“Has he had the same rules and curfew that entire time?”

“No,”

“So what was different about his curfew when he was five compared to now?” Darci asked.

“Well…you see…it’s more like--”

“Either his curfew changed or it didn’t,” Mary cut him off “Which is it?”

Toby's face grew hot "Ok, the times he had to be home at never changed, but he got to stay up later and talk on the phone more as we got older, once we even pulled an all nighter in Minecraft back in middle school,"

None of them responded to that, but in a way that was even worse.

Shifting nervously in her seat, Claire continued the conversation "Were there ever any exceptions to Jim's curfew? Like birthdays or sleepovers?"

"Uh...."

Mary raised a single eyebrow "Toby, have you and Jim *ever* spent the night at each other's houses?"

Bile rose in the back of his throat "No,"

All three of the girls stared at him open mouthed.

"You guys *literally* live right across the street from each other," Darci said incredulously.

Toby forced out a chuckle, trying to dispel some of the tension "Dr. Lake thinks sleepovers aren't healthy. Not sure if I believe it but hey, she's the doctor,"

None of the girls were smiling.

He fought the urge to fidget under their scrutiny. Why did he bring that up? How Dr. Lake did things wasn't anyone else's business. Now they were going to think she was some kind of weirdo.

Claire leaned over and laid her hand over his elbow "Toby, I know this is how it's been for years, but it's not normal to have a curfew that early, or to be that scared for breaking it,"

"Jim was just nervous because, because…" Toby fumbled for the right words "Jim probably just freaked out because he lost track of time and...panicked,"

His painfully clumsy attempt to reassure the girls failed spectacularly. With every word he said their frowns deepened and the three of them kept flashing suspicious glances back and forth.

And when Jim walked in on them like this it would *not* be pretty.

He gripped the edge of the table with sweaty palms. Why did Mary, Darci, and Claire have to make such a big deal about this? Yesterday had been bad, but it was just a curfew slip up, that's all. And sure Dr. Lake's curfew and rules might be a little out there, but there wasn't anything *wrong* with them.

stay here I'll get the scissors

Right?

Jim carefully balanced the bag while pushing open the side door of the school. A brief glance inside revealed all smoothies were present and intact. He hurried up the stairs to the library, mom had agreed to pick him up today, which meant he could stay right up until the last minute, but he still didn't want to miss a second.

Nudging open the library doors with an elbow, he spotted the table they were all sitting at. Jim waited until he was closer before smiling and holding up the bag in greeting "Hey guys, I got the smoothies,"

They all turned at the sound of his voice and immediately he knew something was wrong. Darci and Claire kept exchanging nervous glances, Mary looked like she had bitten into a lemon, and Toby looked like he was about to be sick.

Uneasy, he pulled up a chair and took a seat, setting the bag on the table in front of him "Is everything ok?"

"We need to talk," Mary said bluntly.

"Oh...kay?"

Her eyes narrowed "About yesterday,"

Jim did his best not to flinch.

"Sorry I had to bail like that. I've set an alarm on my phone so it won't happen again,"

Jim hadn't really expected that answer to satisfy them, but part of him was really hoping it would. No such luck.

Darci folded her arms "The issue isn't that you left early, it's about how you did it,"

He let out a nervous chuckle "What...do you mean?"

"Jim,," Claire spoke up "When you ran out of there yesterday, you seemed scared. Really *really* scared. And your mom was acting pretty strange too,"

A lump formed in his throat "Mom...worries,"

"Worries enough to never let you have sleepovers?" Mary said flatly.

Jim very deliberately did not look over toward Toby, even though his friend was squirming in his seat, and bit back the urge to snap at them that how he and his mom did things was none of their business.

"Look, that's a separate thing, me not doing sleepovers has nothing to do with my curfew, and yeah ok, I overreacted a bit, but that's it," Jim stopped himself before he could ramble on any more, his voice had already started to rise in volume and pitch. If he started getting worked up it would make them even more suspicious.

For a few seconds no one said anything, then Darci broke the silence "Jim, we're your friends, you can trust us. If you're having a hard time or if you and your mom are struggling with something, you can tell

us," she gave him a soft smile "Whatever's going on, we're here for you,"

Now all eyes were on him, waiting for his response.

Jim had to hide his hands under the table to hide how badly they were shaking.

We're here for you.

Despite the strained, uncomfortable atmosphere Jim had the hysterical urge to laugh.

He didn't doubt that Darci spoke for everyone there when she said that, but Jim couldn't let himself believe it. What happened to him wasn't like anything they were thinking of. This wasn't a 'normal' family problem like someone getting divorced or sick or moving away. The truth of Jim's life was so far outside the realm of possibility for Toby, Claire, Darci, and Mary that they couldn't even comprehend it.

No one could.

The familiar prickle of anxiety twisted in Jim's stomach as he tried to think of the magic words that would make them let this go.

How worried they were or how much they cared didn't matter. If they found out what he turned into every night it would all go out the window.

The girls would all be horrified, best case they'd run away screaming, worst case they'd call the feds on him. And Toby…

His throat tightened. Jim couldn't even imagine how betrayed Toby would feel after discovering his best friend *lied* to him for over a decade.

But that wasn't going to happen.

He took a deep breath and counted to get his breathing under control.

There was no reason to start panicking and lose his head like he did yesterday. The girls just thought his mom was going overboard with protectiveness. Not the first people to think that and probably wouldn't be the last.

Jim could work with this, he'd been selling that story for years, he could do it again right now. Not lying exactly, just giving them pieces of the truth that fell in line with the idea they already had.

"Everything's ok at home," he started haltingly "It's just that...with only the two of us….things can get hard sometimes,"

They all stayed silent and watched him expectantly, so Jim continued "Mom only wants me home so early so she can know I'm safe. Yesterday she didn't know where I was and I wasn't answering my phone so she got...scared,"

That was the whole truth at least, last night his mom had been the most terrified he'd ever seen her in his entire life.

“Sure it’s not fun sticking to all the rules she has, but if being home at the hours she wants makes things just a little bit easier on her, I’m ok with that,”

He trailed off and everyone at the table shared an uncertain look.

“If you just want to help your mom out why did you have such a major freakout when you realized you were late?” Mary said in a clipped tone “That seems more like a ‘Call your mom and let her know what happened’ situation than a ‘Ditch us all and run back home’ one?”

Jim let out a sheepish laugh “I’m really sorry I bailed the way I did, I’ve never been out that late past curfew before so when I realized the time I kind of…flipped out, but I promise I won’t ditch you like that again,”

He allowed himself to let out a tiny sigh of relief a little when he saw the girls starting to relax from their tense postures, Toby looked so limp with relief that he was practically sliding out of his chair. Jim was almost in the clear, just had to keep it up and smooth over any lingering doubts.

“Everything’s really going ok with you?” Claire asked.

“Yep,” Jim said with a nod “I’m doing just fine,”

“Good,” Darci beamed at him “That’s all we wanted to know,”

Toby grabbed the edge of the table and hauled himself into an upright position “So…” he drummed the tabletop with his fingers “Should we get this study session started?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jim said while pulling his textbooks out of his bag, relieved at the change of subject.

Mary tugged a stack of loose papers out of the tower of books and notes sitting on the table in front of her “Let’s start with history first, I just know that Mr. Strickler’s going to make the final brutal,”

The last of the tension fell out of Jim’s shoulders as they all reached for their smoothies and immersed themselves in notes.

Yesterday had been a close call, probably the closest he’d ever had, but he had bounced back from it just fine. Jim gave himself a mental pat on the back for diffusing the fallout so well. Keeping his cool had paid off just like he knew it would.

His secret was safe and no one was the wiser.

Sure he would have to be extra careful from now on with planning, and hanging out, and making sure he got home on time; but he could do it.

Jim had everything under control.

Chapter End Notes

Jim you are so not in control of this situation that it isn't even funny.

The big confrontation might have seemed anticlimactic, but it's a

pretty big cognitive leap from finding a situation odd to determining that something is very wrong with a situation. Especially since Jim insisted up and down that everything is fine and Toby's backing him up on that. The girls' danger meters were tipped off, but they still have plenty of doubts "Maybe this is just the way some families do it," "Maybe it isn't as bad as it looks," "Jim says everything's ok and he's never given us a reason to doubt him,". Which is why Jim was able to convince them to let it go.

But the thing is; Mary, Claire, and Darci aren't going to forget ANY of this. Even though they aren't actively buzzing anymore their danger meters still went off and that will always be in the back of their minds. And in the next chapter the girls witness something concrete that pushes them past the point of no return. They are given reason to be deeply concerned and there is nothing Jim can do or say to convince them otherwise. They don't learn about his nightly transformations, but they see a damning piece of evidence that was left behind by them.

I just started a new job so I have absolutely no idea what my free time is going to be like for the next month. Chances are I should be able to get the next chapter up before June 30th, but beyond that I really can't say.

And thank you to everyone reading, kudosing, and commenting. I'm glad so many people are enjoying the story so far and it brightens my day just to see it, y'all are the best <3

Darci

Darci shifted the bag onto her hip, leaving her hand free to knock on the door.

“It’s open,” Claire’s voice called from inside.

She quickly opened the door so she could better grip the bag, and headed into the house. Everyone else was already there, Jim and Mary were messing around in the kitchen while Toby fiddled with a pile of cards. Claire waved her over from her seat on the couch.

“I brought the guac, you have the chips?”

Darci held up the tote bag “Right here,”

Claire patted the spot next to her “We’re almost ready, Toby just needs to finish shuffling,”

Toby flashed them a thumbs up without taking his eyes away from the cards flying through his fingers.

“So as soon as our chefs finish we’ll be ready to start,” she gestured towards the kitchen.

“It would go a lot faster if *someone* ,” Jim’s voice wafted out of the kitchen “Would hurry up with the fancy apple juice,”

“Hey, I don’t tell you how to make those little meat pies, you don’t tell me how to do my mocktails,”

“They’re called pasties and more effort goes into them than you’ll ever know,”

“I’m sorry, do you want to play our new years cards against humanity tournament *without* mocktails? Because if you keep it up that’s what’s going to happen,”

Claire made a face and Darci had to stifle a giggle. She didn’t quite succeed and it came out as a snort.

Fortunately the bickering didn’t last and soon Jim and Mary came into the living room with their respective refreshments.

“We’re good to camp out here all day,” Jim said while carefully setting down his tray “But remember to try and be quiet, Mom just got off a graveyard shift and she’s trying to sleep,”

Darci nodded at this, normally they prefered to hang out at Claire’s house where they had a lot more space and didn’t have to worry about disturbing anyone, but since her parents were having a bunch of people over to work on the new nursery they’d been forced to come up with alternate plans.

Toby grabbed the plastic bucket and plunked it down on top of the coffee table “Like we agreed guys, everyone ante up,”

Darci reached into her bag and pulled out the package of sparklers, briefly rereading the label before setting them in the bucket. Around

her everyone else produced some kind of firework and put it in the offered bin.

Those were the terms they'd agreed on, everyone chipped in some of their leftover fireworks from last night, and the winner got the pot.

Now that the stakes were set, Toby started dealing out to each of them from the pile of white cards "Just to make sure everyone remembers, no throwing in the towel, we go until we drop. The winner's the last one standing or the one with the most black cards by five o'clock, whichever comes first," he flashed them a feral grin "Let the games begin,"

Claire returned his predatory look "You'd better bring your A-game TP, because I'm going home with those bottle rockets,"

The two of them stared each other down, Darci glanced over to Jim and Mary. The three of them rolled their eyes simultaneously.

It wasn't like it really mattered who won, whoever it was would just end up shooting them all off at the end of the year bonfire with everyone else.

Jim apparently decided he'd had enough of Toby and Claire's standoff and gently nudged his friend in the shoulder to grab his attention "Ok you dealt so I'll draw the first black one,"

All eyes were on him as he picked up a black card from the top of the deck, flipped it over, and started reading it out loud "Arby's, we have…."

The sound of shuffling filled the room as they all started rifling through their cards. Darci scanned through her hand before one in particular grabbed her attention. This one, this one was perfect. She couldn't control the grin that spread across her face as she set her white card down with the others.

Her card did in fact win the Darci first round, and she won many rounds after that. Though not all of them. Steadily growing piles of black cards grew besides each of them; a visual reminder of each victory. Some rounds were over quickly with a winner being declared in seconds, others took a while, the judge having to choose between multiple very good choices or all bad choices. Some rounds were extended simply because they were all laughing too hard to function.

Their game passed in a blur of giggles, laughs, tears, and groans. So by the time Darci got around to checking her phone, she saw that it was already almost 2pm.

Toby lifted a card from the top of the black deck "Ok, the class field trip was completely ruined by... uh Darci, why are you raising your hand?"

"Hey, uh, not that I'm not having a blast," she slowly lowered her hand "But all those mocktails are catching up to me,"

His eyes widened by just a fraction "Ah,"

They all looked around at the empty glasses and plates surrounding them. Jim was the first to set his cards facedown on the floor "How about we take a quick five minute break?"

"Ok,"

“Sounds good,”

“Fine by me,”

They all set down their cards and started getting to their feet

Darci glanced down the hall “Hey Jim, where’s the bathroom?”

“Down the hall past the kitchen, first door on the right, the other door’s just the basement,”

“Thanks,”

Mary started gathering empty glasses “I’ll go ahead and make more mocktails,”

Claire raised her arms above her head and stretched, no doubt working out the kinks in her back from staying seated so long “I think I’ll use the facilities too,”

“Make that three,” Jim added.

Uh oh, sounded like a line was forming.

Wasting no more time, Darci scurried off to the bathroom as discreetly as she could. She had to go *bad* and did not want to get stuck behind

Claire and Jim. A few minutes later she walked out feeling very relieved, but was surprised to see no one waiting by the door.

Where were Jim and Claire? They'd said they had to go to, so why weren't-- ah, the upstairs bathroom. That must be it.

Looking over to her right revealed that Toby, busy stacking haphazard piles of cards, was the only one in the living room. Sounds of pouring liquids and clinking glasses came from the kitchen, which meant Mary was still in there making drinks. It looked like Toby had the cards under control, so Darci opted to go into the kitchen to see if Mary needed help.

She poked her head through the entryway "You want an assist with those mocktails?"

Mary glanced over to her while still pouring two cans into the large pitcher "I'm just about done, but if you could put the empties in recycle that would be great,"

"Will do,"

Dacri started collecting empty cans and bottles from off the counters. But it was only when her arms were full that she realized she couldn't see a recycling bin anywhere.

"You know where the bin is?"

"Just put them in the paper bag hanging off the back door," Mary replied without looking up from stirring the pitcher "They have some other kind of plan,"

Walking over to the back door, Darci found the bag Mary was talking about with no issue, except for one slight problem. She stared at the narrow opening of the paper bag and then back down at the brimming pile of cans in her arms.

This was going to be a challenge.

Unwilling to admit defeat by setting the cans down on the counter and putting them in one at a time, Darci leaned over and held the pile of cans over the bag. Slowly, she loosened her arms and adjusted her grip so that only a few cans fell into the bag at a time.

She was down to five cans and already congratulating herself for pulling this off when the cans shifted unexpectedly, causing four to fall in the bag while one slipped free and started rolling away. Swearing under her breath, Darci chased after the runaway. The can had a headstart on her and rolled straight towards the cracked basement door.

Don't go through the door, don't go through the door, don't go through the door.

The can slipped perfectly through the crack and she could hear it start bouncing down the steps.

Well darn.

Darci hesitated at the basement door for a second. Jim hadn't specifically said that the basement was off limits, but it always felt weird going into new spaces at other people's houses, especially without explicit permission. It always felt like she was sneaking

around.

Berating herself, Daric opened the door and headed down the creaky wooden steps towards where the can had landed at the bottom. Why was she making such a big deal about this, it wasn't like she was looking at anything private, it was just the basement, not someone's bedroom or home office. Besides, leaving garbage just laying around someone else's house was a lot worse than accidentally snooping.

Having reached the bottom of the steps, Darci bent over and wrapped her fingers around the wayward can; but before she could even stand back up, the already dim basement suddenly became much darker.

She let out a squeak and whirled her head in the direction of the door above her. It was shut, but only partially, the narrow line of light was proof of that. Probably just swung shut by itself because of the way the house settled. Darci let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. What was with her today? She really needed to quit being so jumpy.

Adrenaline fading, Darci turned and walked back up the steps towards the door. But three steps from the top she paused, squinting to try and peer through the gloom.

It looked like there was some kind of weird...pattern on the door. Or was there? It was mostly clustered in one area and didn't look like any kind of decorative pattern she'd seen before. From this distance in the dark she couldn't really tell.

But there was *something* on the door, that much she was sure of.

Curious now, Darci came to the topmost step and leaned in close, cracking the door wider to let in more light.

What she'd first thought was an engraved pattern on the door was actually scratches. Dozens upon dozens of overlaying scratches clustered just below the middle of the door. Darci's eyes flitted across the numerous grooves. These marks didn't look like a one off thing either. They were so deeply layered on top of each other, something must have scratched this door over and over again for a long time. In fact they looked almost like--

Her heart stopped.

Darci raised a hand up, desperately hoping to be proven wrong as she lined her fingers up with a group of the scratches. To her horror they aligned perfectly.

She realized her fingers were trembling.

"Mary!" she hissed, not wanting to shout but needing someone else to see this "Mary come check this out!"

"What is it?"

"Just get over here!"

Mary's footsteps came towards the basement as Darci pushed the door open and stepped out into the hall, putting the scratches on full display.

Mary came around the corner, frowning, no doubt unhappy about being called over so hastily. Not even bothering to try and pacify her,

Darci worlessly pointed towards the scratches. It took Mary a few seconds to notice what Darci was pointing at, but the instant she did her jaw dropped and her eyes got huge “What the hell is all that?”

Darci lined up her fingers to the scratches to demonstrate “I think these are claw marks,” she whispered “Someone was locked in the basement,”

“Holy shit….” Mary said with hushed incredulity, pulling out her phone and snapping a few pics of the scored wood.

Darci moved from examining the door itself to the knob. She was stunned to see it didn’t have a lock in it, meaning that it should have been impossible for anyone to be locked down there. And the knob matched all the others in the house so it wasn’t likely that a lockable knob had been replaced with a lockless knob.

So why had someone been clawing at a door that shouldn’t have been stopping them in the first place?

Her brain chased itself in circles, trying to come up with a solution to the paradox in front of her. Winding Darci into a tighter and tighter spring of anxiety and confusion, and ultimately getting nowhere.

Maybe a different perspective was what she needed to solve this puzzle.

Stepping fully back up into the hall, Darci shut the door all the way. Glancing at the walls surrounding the door for anything odd. It took her a little while but eventually she noticed something.

Something that would have otherwise appeared more or less normal, if not for what was on the basement door.

An exercise band was hanging on a hook attached to the wall just over a foot away from the door, the hook was exactly level with the doorknob.

Not even realizing what she was doing, Darci lifted the free end of the band, reached over, and looped it over the knob. It fit, but just barely, tension in the band keeping the door firmly shut. Lock or no lock *that* would keep someone in the basement.

Mary was almost manically snapping more pictures now, shaking hands barely able to hold her phone up “Holy shit holy shit holy shit!” she hissed.

Darci forced herself to reach out and slip the band off the door, needing to see the scratches again, even though their image was already burned into her retinas. To force her brain to accept the fact that what Darci was looking at was real.

Looking at the layers of claw marks again something else clicked.

Something that made Darci start to feel physically ill.

How low they were on the door. How tightly clustered the marks were.

Whoever had been locked in the basement had been *tiny* .

“Oh my god,” Mary whispered “It was Jim...”

It took Darci a few seconds to actually process what Mary had said “What are you talking about?”

“The weird curfew, the way he freaked out when he was late, what do you think!”

Darci immediately wanted to say something denying that, but all she could do was stand there with her jaw hanging open.

This house looked fairly new, twenty, thirty years old tops. And Jim said he’d lived here since he was born, that still left a ten year gap when someone else lived here and could have left the marks….

No. The marks didn’t look brand new, but they didn’t look thirty years old either. If she had to guess Darci would say they were made about ten years ago. Right about the time Jim would have been in elementary school.

And the hook with the band, those were definitely a recent thing.

A wave of cold dizziness washed over her. Her head was light and her knees went weak. Darci still couldn’t believe this was real, she didn’t *want* to believe this was real. She was barely aware of Mary looking frantically back and forth between her phone and the door. These things were only supposed to happen to far off strangers on the news and in magazines. Not here right in front of her face, not to someone she went to school with every day.

How had they not noticed-- how had *she* not noticed? All the weird

rules, the crazy hours, why had it taken this long to put it together? And according to Toby this had been going for years, *years* for crying out loud! How could Jim have lived through years of...this...

Darci was so out of it she barely noticed the sound of footsteps from behind the bathroom door.

Heavy *adult* footsteps.

Adrenaline surged, snapping Darci out of her state of shock. Lightning fast, she shoved the basement door shut with her left hand and grabbed Mary's arm with the right. Ignoring her friend's squawk of protest and yanking her away from the basement. Just before the bathroom door swung open and out came--

"Hi girls, you having fun with your card game?"

"Oh yeah for sure," Mary said chipperly.

Darci was beyond grateful that Mary could still act casual after what they'd seen. It was all she could do to force a smile on her face and nod, desperately hoping she didn't look as nervous as she felt.

"Well don't mind me, I just came down here because there was a line upstairs," Dr. Lake flashed them a smile before turning and heading towards the staircase "Now it's back to bed for me,"

Without warning Mary shoved two mocktail glasses into Darci's hands, picking up the other three herself "We'll just grab our drinks and get back to our game,"

Dr. Lake spared them a quick nod as she went up the stairs “Sounds good, and help yourselves to anything you need,”

“Will do,” Mary replied, herding Darci towards the living room.

It was all she could do to put one foot in front of the other.

Standing in front of them in pajamas and slippers, Jim’s mom seemed so nice, so *normal* , how could she be the type of person who would…

Darci took one final glance at the door as they walked by, catching a brief glimpse of the scratches, confirming that she hadn’t just hallucinated it.

“Don’t worry, I still have the pictures,” Mary whispered, barely audible, into her ear.

Oh. That’s right. Darci was so busy being shell shocked she’d forgotten all about that.

Stepping back into the living room she saw that everyone else was already there and waiting.

“Hey guys,” Toby piped up “You ready to get started”

“Totally,” Mary said while passing out mocktails, if Darci didn’t know better she would have believed the enthusiasm in Mary’s voice was

genuine.

“Darci?”

All eyes were on her, expectantly waiting for a reply.

“Yeah…you’d better believe it…”

The rest of the afternoon passed in a haze. Mindlessly putting down cards when she was called to, not even bothering to read what was on them.

Mainly she was focused on trying not to stare at Jim. To turn to him and ask why. Why hadn’t Jim said anything, why hadn’t he asked any of them for help? They’d sat next to each other every day at lunch for six months and he’d never let on that any of this was happening. Did he think no one would believe him, or was he scared of what his mom would do if he told? She would have thought that they trusted each other enough by now, so why…

The coppery tang of blood filled her mouth as her teeth cut into her tongue with the force Darci was biting it. If she started now there would be no stopping the flood. Right now Darci just had to get through this afternoon and talk about what she’d seen with Mary later. That meant she needed to stay calm, keep her head on. Not giving in to the urge to scream ‘What the hell?!’ at Jim every time she saw him out of the corner of her eye. And it didn’t help that she had to fight the urge to jump every time she heard Dr. Lake moving upstairs. Not. At. All.

Their game seemed to drag on so long that Darci thought it would never end, but eventually it did, not soon enough and far too early at the same time. She joined the other’s in cleaning up, moving like she

was in a fog. Robotically picking up stray cards and putting away dirty dishes. And soon, far too soon, Jim was shutting the door behind them.

What would happen to him now that the door was shut and they were gone?

Toby jogged over to his own house, gazing forlornly at the plastic pail in Claire's arms as he waved goodbye. Dacri jerkily raised her hand and moved it from side to side in an effort to mirror the gesture. Something that Mary pulled off much better and Claire didn't even have to fake.

Lucky her.

Claire was the last one to turn away, still beaming and waving at Toby even as they rounded the turn and he vanished from sight..

"I don't know about you guys, but we *need* to do that again, before next year," she paused, no doubt waiting for them to chime in in agreement, but Darci couldn't speak past the massive knot in her throat. And Mary looked grim and gaunt, no longer maintaining the mask she'd had for the last few hours.

When her friends didn't reply Claire turned and faced them "Is everything ok? You've been pretty quiet all afternoon Darc,"

Mary stopped in her tracks, laying a hand on Claire's shoulder to halt her as well. Darci stopped right along with them. She glanced towards Darci, the two of them sharing a knowing look.

Claire's gaze flickered back and forth between them. Mouth crumpling into a frown when she recognized that they were in on a secret she didn't share "Guys, what's going on?"

"Claire…" Mary spoke up softly, she looked over at Darci for approval. Darci nodded back at her. Claire deserved to know the truth, but if Darci tried to explain she would just end up crying.

Looking grim, Mary pulled her phone out "Claire, you need to see this…"

Mary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The concrete bench of the table Mary was sitting at was profoundly uncomfortable. It had never been the most luxurious place to have lunch, but today the molded concrete seemed extra hard and gritty. And based off the looks on Claire and Darci’s faces, they felt the exact same way.

But the seating arrangements were the least of their worries right now. Mary kept her gaze fixed squarely on the side door of the school building in the distance. Waiting for Jim and Toby to come outside and approach.

The three of them had spent weeks planning to time this perfectly down to the last second. Beginning of lunch period, and their next class was literally two minutes away. Outdoor table on the far side of the school property; no crowds, limited traffic. Wednesday on their first week back, well enough into the week that all new projects and assignments had been given out, but not soon enough for anything to be due.

Plenty of time to sit and talk, no rushing to finish or get to their next class. And their table was far enough out of the way that no one would be near enough to overhear or interrupt.

They'd briefly tossed around the idea of trying to talk to Jim at one of their houses, but in the end decided against it. It might make Jim feel cornered and that was the last thing they wanted.

With all the thought they'd put into this there was no way it wouldn't go perfectly.

But that didn’t stop Mary from being so anxious she wanted to puke.

She had never done anything like this before. Hell, she'd never thought she'd have to. But here she was.

Her breath hitched when Mary saw Jim and Toby step out of the door and start to walk up to their table from the far side of the field. A wave of nausea washed over her, although she did her best not to show it.

Mary swallowed hard and forced her stomach to settle. Keep it together, this wasn't about her. It was about Jim, she owed it to him to do this. And besides, she wasn't alone.

In her peripheral vision Mary could see Claire sitting straight up hands folded in her lap, taut as a wire; Darci gripping the concrete bench beneath her with fingers like claws.

Without raising her arms more than an inch, Mary reached out and covered each of her friends' hands with one of her own.

They were going to get through this; all of them. By the end of today the hardest part would be over and Jim would be safe. They just had to rip the band aid off and get things going.

Jim and Toby took their seats at the table, smiling and relaxed like it was just another regular day of lunch.

If only.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” Toby said cheerfully.

None of them said anything, his sunny attitude seemed painfully out of place.

Toby instantly picked up on the mood “Is something wrong, why the long faces?”

In her peripheral vision Mary could see Dacri and Claire stiffen on either side of her.

This was it. Time to find out once and for all whether or not Jim's mom was doing what they thought she was.

She pulled in a deep breath through her nose. From the beginning Mary knew she was going to have to be the one to take point on this. Claire still had her huge crush on Jim, not that there was anything wrong with that, but it might hold her back from pushing too hard if Jim needed an extra shove. And quite frankly Darci was just too nice. The possibility of bringing Toby in on their plan had come up, but had gotten shot down almost immediately. There hadn't been a good way to meet up with him alone over break, and trying to tell him over the phone was *way* too dicey.

Bottom line, they could *not* risk Dr. Lake getting tipped off.

Which meant it all fell down to Mary to take charge. Was she looking forward to it? Hell no. But there was a chance Jim could be in serious trouble. And there was no fucking way Mary was going to let that go on.

Not if she could do something about it.

“Actually…” Mary spoke up slowly and deliberately “There’s something we need to talk about,”

The second the words left her mouth Toby froze and Jim went rigid, after a few beats of awkward silence he gave her a painful looking smile.

“Is this about my curfew again? I’ve told you guys I just--”

“We know your mom locks you in the basement,”

And there it was, out in the open.

Even though Mary had seen the scratches on the door with her own two eyes. Looked at the pictures of them on her phone over a thousand times, to the point where she thought she was going insane; there had been a part of her that doubted. That whispered there was probably a perfectly reasonable explanation for everything that she was just too dumb to think of. And accusing his mom of the worst would be crossing an unforgivable line; pissing Jim off beyond belief and completely humiliating herself, along with Darci and Claire, in the process.

But one look at his face and every doubt she had vanished.

The way his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, the juice box slipping from his hand and landing on his tray with a clunk. How she could practically see the his face get paler by the second.

It was true. Every bit of it. Jim's mom was locking him up and he'd been keeping it secret from everyone this whole time.

“How-- how did--”

“We saw the scratches on the basement door when we were over on new years,” Mary said, softer now “Don’t worry, we believe you,”

“Oh my god,” Claire whispered “The night after the movies…I’m so sorry Jim, I never would have suggested we stay late if I knew your mom would…”

Toby stared back and forth between Jim and Claire, looking completely lost “I don’t…what are you guys-- what are you guys talking about?”

Mary ignored him. Toby could be brought up to speed later. Now that they knew for sure what Jim's mom was doing, they needed to take the next step "Ok Jim, you need to talk to the police, like yesterday,"

He blinked at her “What?”

“It will be ok, after school we’ll all go with you to the police station. And even if the cops don’t believe you I have pictures of the scratch marks on the door on my phone. That should be enough to convince them,”

Instead of reassuring him, Jim looked horrified by this idea “No! We can’t do that!”

Darci got up and walked around the table to take a seat a Jim's side "Jim, you're scared, I get it, but we have your back, you don't have to be afraid of your mom anymore,"

“That’s not-- that isn’t--” Jim laid his head in his hands and let out a deep, shuddering breath “It’s not what you guys think...”

“Jim, what-- what are you saying?” Toby’s voice shook with steadily rising panic “What’s going on?”

Jim whipped his head over towards Toby, expression agonized
“Tobes-- I, I...”

Claire raised both hands up “Ok let’s just all just take a deep breath calm down,” she looked over towards Jim “Darci’s right, we’re in this together, and we’re not going to let your mom hurt you. But you *have* to tell people what’s happening,”

Rather than reassure him their words seemed to have the opposite effect. Jim was hunched over with his arms wrapped around himself, shaking more and more with every breath he took.

A frown started tugging on Mary's lips as uncertainty crept in. Even if they went with Jim to the police station, would he even be able to bring himself to tell the truth? If she had scared him so bad that he was too afraid to talk about it even when it was just the five of them….

No. She wasn’t going to let that happen.

Steeling herself, Mary reached into her pocket to pull out her phone. If Jim wasn't strong enough to do this by himself right now then Mary would do it for him.

How could she call herself his friend if she didn’t.

“Ok new plan. *You* don’t worry about anything, I’ll call the police tell them everything,” she looked up and gave him her most confident smile, the one that said ‘Don't worry I’ve got this’ “And if push comes to shove I’ll convince my moms to let you sleep on our couch,”

Mary had just pulled up the website for the Arcadia Oaks police department when her phone was nearly ripped from her hands.

She jerked backwards on reflex and was stunned to see Jim hanging halfway over the table “Jim! What the hell!?”

“You can’t call the cops on my mom!”

“Um, I have vocal chords and a working phone, I’m pretty sure I can,”

“You’re going to get her in trouble!”

Daric put a hand on his shoulder, expression wavering between sympathy and confusion “Jim, if your mom locks you in the basement then she should be in trouble,”

“It’s-- It’s not like that!”

“Then what is it like?” Toby’s voice was steadier now but his smile was brittle “Just-- tell us what really happened, I’m sure this is just a big misunderstanding,”

Jim whipped around, looking at all of them in turn, jaw working up and down with words he couldn't manage to say.

This was starting to go off the rails, time for Mary to get things back on track, she laid her phone face down on the table, so Jim knew he had her full attention “I don’t know what your mom said she’d do if you told anyone, but whatever it is we won’t let it happen, you don’t have to pretend anymore,”

Before Jim could even open his mouth to get a word out, Darci spoke up “Mare’s right, no matter what your mom said she’d do if you told, we can protect you,”

He just stared at her like she just told him the world was ending.

Jim grabbed the edge of the table, painful looking with the strength he was gripping the concrete with, his breath came in increasingly large, quivering, gusts. It looked like he was an inch away from either crying or screaming “Guys-- stop it, please,”

Toby reached out and rubbed Jim's unoccupied shoulder comfortingly, a pained look on his face. Mary shared an uncertain glance with Darci and Claire. They knew things might get tense but this was bad. They *needed* to convince him that they wouldn't let his mom retaliate. The police would stop her, if push came to shove *they* would stop her.

But if they wanted to stop her for good Jim had to *talk*.

Trying one more time, Claire sat up straighter and leaned forward “I know this is hard Jim. But your mom doing this to you…that isn’t right. You need to talk to the cops, or a teacher, or *someone* so they can help you,”

“I don’t-- it’s not--” Jim flicked his gaze from side to side before lowering his head and speaking in a hoarse whisper “Mom hasn’t locked me down there since I was seven, ok?”

You could have heard a pin drop as all of them stared at him in horrified silence.

“She…she what?” Toby whispered.

Jim’s eyes widened and he clapped a hand over his mouth, as if just now realizing what he said.

Mary knew her jaw was hanging open but she couldn't figure out how to shut it. Her brain had short circuited and now none of her body parts would work right.

They'd known from the scratches that Jim had been locked in the basement when he was younger, but to know that he'd been *that* little….

Two wires clicked in her brain.

A chill flickered to life in her chest, slowly starting to creep across the rest of her body as the horrifying thought took root.

If Jim had been that young when his mom had *stopped* locking him in the basement….

That he must have been even younger when she started.

The edges of her vision got blurry as her head started to swim. How old had he been? Five…four…. *three?* Mary's stomach curdled as she imagined Jim as a little little kid locked down in that cold, dark basement.

Meanwhile Jim was trying to stammer out an explanation “N-- no I, I didn’t mean-- you guys have to understand, I was a messed up kid, Mom only put me down there because she had to!”

Mary ignored his babbling and pulled her phone back up with shaking hands “I’m calling the police now,” she barely managed to keep her voice firm “I don’t care what kind of a kid you were. If your mom has been locking you in the basement for that long then she should be in jail. Plain and simple,”

Jim looked at her like she'd slapped him "Look, I can't tell you why, but she doesn't deserve to go to jail, *please you have to believe me!* "

Mary glanced over at him; wincing at his terrified, pleading expression. This was hard, and she felt for him, she really did, But the only way out was forward, and no matter how tough this was going to be for him they needed to push through.

One day Jim would thank her.

“I know you’re scared Jim, but I promise once we tell the right people this is all going to get better,” she softened her voice “Your mom isn’t going to lock you up ever again,”

She had already dialed half of the non-emergency number for the Arcadia Oaks PD when she heard Jim speak up.

“No…what…what I said was wrong,”

Mary paused in her typing and glanced up from the screen, everyone but Jim wore matching looks of surprise “Wait, you mean your mom didn’t stop locking you in the basement when you were seven?”

Jim’s features wavered before hardening into a cold mask “No, I mean my mom didn’t lock me in the basement at all,”

All Mary could do was blink.

What?

“Jim,” Darci turned towards him, eyebrows furrowed in confusion
“You literally just said that she did,”

“No.” his voice grew steely “I didn’t,”

He shook off their hands and grabbed his tray, standing up from the table “My mom never locked me in the basement and that’s what I’ll say to the cops or anyone else who asks, now I need to go and get started my spanish paper,”

Seeing Jim turn to walk away, from them, from everything they were trying to do to help him, red hot fire exploded in Mary's chest "No you don't," she growled with a force that surprised her, pushing herself out of her seat "The paper isn't due until next Friday and I *know* you planned on working on it during free period on Thursday and Tuesday. So. *Don't. Lie. To. Me* ."

All of them recoiled from the venom in her voice as she practically spat the words out, even Jim staggered before quickly composing himself “Look, it doesn’t matter, my mom never locked me in the basement and that’s that, and whatever scratches you *think* you saw, those were probably just made by racoons,”

Thinking quick, Mary grabbed her phone and waved it in front of him “Well I’m pretty sure the recording I just made would disagree,”

It was a complete and total bluff. She hadn't actually recorded anything, but Jim didn't need to know that.

Jim’s face went from stony to stricken as he lunged forward, making a grab at her phone. Mary danced out of reach and clutched it tighter to her chest.

“G-- g-- give me that,”

Claire got to her feet and stood by Mary's side, stand off forming "Jim, your mom locked you up, we all know it so why are you trying to protect her? You don't have to be afraid of her anymore, we can keep you safe,"

Jim looked longingly at the phone nestled snugly in Mary's hands "You guys don't get it, I'm not afraid of my mom, I can't let you get her into trouble,"

Darci came up beside him “Ok, when an adult locks a little kid in a basement that’s wrong, you *know* that right?”

“I-- I-- I was a screwed up kid, she had no choice,”

“No you weren’t Jim,” Toby said, slowly getting to his feet to flank him “You really weren’t,”

“And it really doesn’t matter what kind of kid you were,” Darci said with increased exasperation “You know what your mom’s doing is wrong, so *why* are you trying to defend her?”

Jim slammed his tray on the ground “ *You don’t understand!* ”

“*Then tell us!*” Mary shrieked so loud that Señor Ulh, all the way over on the front walkway, turned and stared “*Make us understand! Just stop lying and let us help you!”*

Mary knew she shouldn't be screaming; they'd come here to help Jim, not harass him, but she couldn't help it. Dr. Lake shoved him in the basement and put a lock on the door. And he was *lying* about it to protect *her* . The person who was *hurting* him.

Taking advantage of the lull of silence, Claire darted around the table towards Jim “Listen, no matter what your mom said or did we’re your friends and we’ll *always* have your back, but we can’t help you if you don’t tell the truth,”

Jim frantically looked around, cagey and desperate, without even meaning to they'd surrounded him on all sides.

“ *Please…* ” Claire reached out and put a hand on Jim’s shoulder “Just let us help you,”

Now they all looked at him expectantly. Jim shriveled under their gazes, curling in on himself and gripping his upper arms with what must have been bruising force.

Mary stayed where she was, head held high and feet firmly planted on the ground, eyes locked on Jim. Bracing herself for the coming storm of tears, accusations, or whatever else Jim was going to explode with.

Suddenly he bolted, turning and sprinting away from them back towards the school. The four of them were stunned into silence for a split second before Toby and Claire started after him, Mary and Darci rooted in place with shock.

“Jim stop-- wait! Come back!”

“Please Jim, we’re only trying to help!”

If Jim heard them he ignored them, not slowing down as he ran up to the door and ripped it open with surprising force.

Even from this far away Mary could see crystal clear as the door slammed shut right in Toby’s face.

Chapter End Notes

Teenagers, they have enough social knowledge to be aware of abusive homes and circumstances. But not nearly enough worldly experience to appropriately handle it when they think that someone they know is in that type of situation.

Not to mention the truth of Jim's situation is nothing like they're imagining, which just adds gasoline to the fire.

In this story Jim has two main fears, having his blue (troll) form revealed and something bad happening to his mom (and not necessarily in that order). The possibility of both of those things happening was just thrown in his face at once, which is why he reacted as badly as he did. Now that being said, Jim has now proven to his friends that he will outright lie about events he knows to be true, seemingly in order to protect his mom. That is REALLY going to come back and bite him later.

And Mary might have seemed a little hot under the collar, but she wasn't angry at Jim. She was confused and frustrated by the way he reacted; and angry at herself for not noticing something was off with him sooner.

Next time, the chapter where Toby Domzalski gets put through the emotional wringer.

Toby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It felt like if he pushed himself any harder his heart was literally going to explode. Squashing down the pain, Toby forced himself to peddle even faster. By the time he pulled into the cul de sac going what felt like fifty miles an hour his lungs were on fire and an impressively painful stitch had formed in his side “Jim--” he gasped, unable to take in the air he needed to carry his voice “Wait!”

Jim’s gaze flickered over his shoulder, proof that he had heard and understood him, before he quickly pressed the button to open his garage door and darted inside without hesitation. Toby biked after him as fast as he could, desperate to catch up, but despite giving it his all the garage door shut well before he reached it.

For a few moments he stood there straddling his bike in the driveway, staring at the shut door. There was a fierce ache in his side and a burning pain in his lungs, but both of those things were nothing compared to the crushing disappointment.

In theory Toby could still knock on the front door or try calling Jim, or even use the walkie-talkies, but he’d spent two solid hours trying all three of those things yesterday with nothing to show for it. He doubted today would be any different.

Guess there was no point to hanging around then.

Grudgingly, Toby turned and trudged back to his house, feeling heavier with each step.

Parking his bike outside, he entered and shut the door as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake Nana up from her afternoon nap. He had hoped that if he left school early enough and really hurried home, he could catch Jim before he managed to lock himself inside his house.

But even that had failed. Just one more thing to add on to Toby Domzalski's ever extending list of fuck ups.

Well today was a wash, might as well get some dinner.

Toby forced himself to get out a bowl and a box of cereal and took a seat at the table.

It wasn't like Jim had dropped off the face of the earth, he was literally right across the street. Tomorrow morning Toby could try to confront him outside his house, or even follow him to school. But if Jim was able to cut and run so quick going home, he wouldn't have any problem doing the same when he left in the morning.

And knowing Jim, he could keep this up for a long *long* time.

Toby stared down into the empty cereal bowl. His stomach was empty but he still felt like puking.

Even if he did manage to pin Jim down, he probably wouldn't give any more than the same stony silence he gave when Toby cornered him in the locker rooms yesterday when he'd learnt the awful truth.

So who the hell was he trying to kid by thinking he could accomplish anything?

Jim might not have fallen off the face of the earth, but he might as well have.

Toby flopped facedown on the table, head laying between his slumped arms. His stomach was hollow and grumbling but making the cereal seemed like more trouble than it was worth at this point.

He was an idiot. Probably the biggest idiot on the face of the earth. Scratch that, the biggest idiot in the known universe, and probably the unknown universe to.

His best friend had been going through hell for years and Toby hadn't even bothered to notice.

It wasn't like there hadn't been signs. The curfew, the weird rules, strange behavior. The real question was why the hell it had taken this long for Toby to see what really went on in the house across the street.

His eyes burned in a way that had become far too familiar in the past two days.

In the end Toby had never seen Jim's life for what it really was; it was Mary, Darci, and Claire who literally shoved the truth under his nose.

But even when they'd told him, when Jim himself had all but admitted it, Toby still didn't believe, not really.

Not until the girls had shown him the photos.

And when he saw those claw marks on the basement door it felt like the earth was torn out from under his feet.

Toby hadn't felt steady since.

A lead ball of guilt sank deeper into his belly.

If the girls hadn't uncovered the truth, how long would Toby have plodded along none the wiser to what Jim's life with Dr. Lake was really like?

Part of him wondered if he ever would have noticed.

So what else had he missed? There had been more signs over the years that had flown under his radar. Toby propped his head up on his chin and wracked his memories for the slightest clue.

No Halloween. No sleepovers. No guests over after dark. Their camping trips were *family* only--

Wait.

Jim and Dr. Lake camped a lot, it was kind of their thing. So why didn't they take any pictures on their trips?

Well that wasn't exactly true, they did kind of take pictures. They took a few pictures, but only one or two with a really old polaroid camera,

that they only ever used on camping trips.

It didn't make sense. Nana and Dr. Lake probably had a documentary's worth of digital photos on a shared Google Photos account between the two of them. Taken using a combination of phones and digital cameras. So why didn't Jim and Dr. Lake take normal family photos during their camping trips? Were they doing something they didn't want anyone else to see?

Then why the polaroids?

Toby didn't know, he had know idea. His brain hurt trying to stretch itself to unravel the solution to this puzzle. Grimacing, he forced himself to set aside the camping photo conundrum for now and go back to re-evaluating his memories.

The next thing that stuck out in his mind was Jim's birthday meltdown during the first week of school last September. But Jim had just been upset about his dad, it had nothing to do with--

Toby's train of thought screeched to a halt, a horrible icy feeling blooming to life in his gut.

He thought back on those few weeks, desperately rifling through his memories. Searching for any recollection of Jim telling him that he'd been upset about his dad.

To his dismay he found none.

And now that he thought about it, Jim had never told Toby why he was upset at *all* .

In other words Toby had jumped to the most convenient answer and Jim had just gone along with it.

His heartbeat picked up, what else, what other signs of abuse had he seen over the past decade that he'd just explained away to himself?

Stay here I'll get the scissors

His forehead hit the table with a dull thunk. No doubt there were countless times Toby had seen something telling that he could search his memory for, but he was too exhausted and wrung out to keep going.

God he was the worst friend ever.

The evidence was so obvious it might as well have come labeled exhibits A, B, and C; anyone who looked twice could tell that Jim's mom was hurting him. And every time Toby had seen the signs of the abuse that was going on he'd either justified it or flat out ignored it.

Why?

Why had he ignored Jim's suffering every day for ten years?

The guilt rolling around in his stomach got ten times heavier.

Like he didn't know damn well why already.

Because Toby liked having a cool friend with a cool mom that included him and let him tag along for everything they did. He liked having a little surrogate family of his own. And lying to himself was a lot less painful than having his so-called happy family disrupted.

Toby pushed the cheerios away. Eating anything right now would be a mistake.

He and Jim had called themselves best friends for over ten years. They'd sworn to always have each other's backs through thick and thin. But in the end Toby had let him down in the way that mattered the most.

The cold face Jim made when he started claiming his mom had never locked him up flashed in his mind.

But now, after years had passed, was it too late to help him?

Toby turned to rest his cheek against the cool wood and shut his eyes. A little voice in the back of his head was shouting that he still couldn't give up, that Jim needed him now more than ever, that he should force down some cereal and try to get a good night sleep so tomorrow he would be ready for round two. Part of him wanted to listen to the little voice, but the crushing guilt was a lot louder. Not to mention Toby was too wrung out to even consider moving.

He stayed there slumped on the table like that for a long time. The determined part of him urging him to get up, and the burnt out part telling the rest of him to shut up.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Jerking up ramrod straight, Toby came face to face with his Nana, concern etched deeply into her wrinkled face.

“Toby pie, why on earth did you fall asleep at the table?”

“Huh?” Toby snapped his gaze towards the window, he was stunned to see that it was pitch black out, guess he really had fallen asleep.

She gave his shoulder a squeeze “What’s wrong?”

That’s Nana for you, legally blind but could spot boo-boos and hurt feelings from over a mile away. For a moment he considered lying and telling her everything was fine, but knowing Nana she’d see through that in nanosecond.

“It’s kind of…a lot of things,”

Without missing a beat she pulled up a chair right next to him “Want to talk about it?”

Did he? Toby honestly wasn’t sure. This was… a lot, for anyone to take in, let alone Nana, who’d know the Lakes just as long as he had. Would she even believe him if he told her?

But then again, she might know a way to help Jim, more than he’d been able to accomplish anyways.

And the way everything had been building up inside him, practically suffocating him for the last two days; the thought of getting at least *some* of this off his chest was too tempting to pass up.

Toby decided to try and approach the subject from the side, test the waters, see how Nana responded "The way Jim and Dr. Lake do things, with the super early curfew and the weird rules, that...isn't normal, is it?"

The look she gave him was sad and sympathetic, but much to his shock, not surprised "No. It isn't,"

"Wait…" Toby leaned forward in his chair "Have you….always known that?"

"Yes, I have,"

Red hot indignation exploded to life in Toby's chest, but he squashed it as fast as he could before it could start to show on his face. With how long it had taken him to notice what was going on with Jim and Dr. Lake he had no right to be mad at anyone else.

But why, if she'd known why hadn't she said anything, done anything? Jim had been living through hell and she had just sat back and done nothing.

"If you knew, why didn't you ever say anything?" Toby barely kept his voice from cracking "Call Dr. Lake out, tell her she needed to shape up? Tell Jim 'screw what your mom says' and go live your life,"

Nana let out a heavy sigh and scooted her chair closer, close enough

to wrap both arms around him “Because I don’t think it would have done any good,”

Despite the tension, Toby softened into the embrace almost instinctively, resting the side of his head on her shoulder. He still had over a thousand questions, but he could sense Nana had a lot more to say.

“Sometimes when people experience something traumatic, it affects the way they perceive things,” Nana tightened her grip on Toby ever so slightly “This is nothing you should repeat to anyone else, but I think that when her husband walked out, Barbara became so afraid of losing Jim to, that she let that fear cloud her judgement with every decision she made going forward,”

Toby forced himself not to react, but on the inside all the pieces were flying into place. It made sense. Too much sense. It was the kind of thing that would cause Dr. Lake to lock Jim up at night while still acting like a regular mom during the day.

She wanted him to be safe and stay with her so much that she’d started using wooden doors and locks to do it. And Jim loved her back so much that he let her.

On one hand it made him feel a little better. Dr. Lake wasn’t some two faced psycho who acted all nice in public but turned into a monster when no one was looking.

But on the other…

How could he get Jim to fight back when she was doing this out of some messed up kind of love?

A slight edge of shame crept into Nana's voice as she kept going "There have been many times I wanted to say something to her, but no matter what I said or did I don't think I could make Barbara change her mind. If anything, I think it just would have made her double down and isolate themselves even more,"

Nana pulled away just enough to give Toby a gentle, reassuring smile "But while I don't agree with a lot of the choices Barbara makes, deep down I know she wouldn't do anything that would put Jim in harm's way,"

Toby's heart froze; a cold, jagged lump stabbing him from the inside even as he fought to keep his face neutral.

She didn't know.

She knew about the curfew and weird rules but not the rest.

She hadn't connected the dots with the strange photos, with the excuses and lack of explanations.

She hadn't seen what was on the basement door.

All the implications of what she did and didn't know flew through his head as the ice in his heart slowly turned to steel.

At that moment Toby made an ironclad decision.

No matter what happened, no matter how far this went. Toby was *never* going to let Nana learn what he knew. Never let her find out that Dr. Lake had locked Jim in the basement.

Because if she did, if she found out just how deep Dr. Lake's fear ran, she would never forgive herself for not protecting Jim.

Nana was family, real family in more than just biology. She'd been there for him since day one, she was the one who took on everything once his parents were gone. And she'd been his rock even while he knew she must have been mourning her own son.

And she would never throw him in the basement and lock the door.

Now it was Toby's turn to protect her, even if it meant he had to take care of this by himself.

Fortunately his moment of panic went unnoticed as Nana continued "Barbara's my friend and I know she would never hurt Jim, but if I had ever suspected she was taking things too far, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to tell the right people,"

That made him start "What-- really!? I thought Dr. L was like, your BFF?!"

"Barbara is a dear friend," Nana said patiently "But I have a duty to Jim, to ensure that he is safe and well cared for. Having to make that kind of call would tear me up inside, but if I had to I would do it in a heartbeat,"

Hearing those words from her was like someone ringing a tuning fork

inside his skull. The raging storm of anxiety and despair that had been roiling inside him for the past few days vanished like a puff of smoke. Leaving the solution crystal clear.

Toby sat up straighter, resolve filling him, making him feel steadier than he had in days. Washing away every last drop of uncertainty and doubt.

He knew what he had to do now.

The thought practically made him sick, but it was the only way to get Jim the help he needed.

“I know it’s hard and can feel like you’re not doing enough, but the best way to help Barbara and Jim is just to be there in whatever way you can. Be a friend, be someone they know they can trust. Be an example and show them that there’s another way to live, does that make sense?”

Toby stood up and wrapped Nana in a bear hug, which she just as readily returned.

“That helps a lot. Thanks Nana, I feel a lot better now,”

Right now Toby was the most nervous he’d ever been in his entire life. He was pacing so frenziedly he wouldn’t be surprised if he’d worn a rut into the bathroom floor.

Was this the ideal place for a serious conversation, or even a good one? No way. But Toby happened to know for a fact that Jim stopped by this bathroom almost every day before language arts class, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

Not to mention this was the last stop to get off before he took the nuclear option.

If this conversation didn't work out the way he hoped, Toby knew what he had to do, was willing to do it when the time came.

But he still really *really* didn't want to.

That's why he'd decided to try talking to Jim one last time. Deep down he really wasn't sure Jim would be any more vocal now than he had been the past few days, but he and Dr. Lake deserved one last chance to come clean.

Toby owed them that much.

The door swung open, causing Toby to jolt with surprise before scurrying back to press himself against the wall. Jim walked in, door swinging shut behind him. The sight of his friend filled Toby with equal parts unease and relief.

He quickly shuffled to the side, maneuvering himself to block the exit.

Jim turned at the sound, the second his eyes landed on Toby his face blanked.

Toby didn't waste a second "We need to talk,"

"There's nothing to talk about," Jim ducked his head and tried to sidestep around Toby to the door, but he didn't budge.

"Oh yes we do Jim. This isn't the kind of thing we can just forgive and forget. This is a big freaking deal,"

Jim's expression twisted into something deeply pained "It isn't-- Mom's not like that,"

Sucking in a deep, grounding breath, Toby took a step forward "You remember my twelfth birthday? We were at Disneyland and I kept asking you why you could never have sleepovers?"

Jim wouldn't look him in the eye, but Toby still caught the flash of recognition on his face.

"You said you wanted to tell me why, but you couldn't, it was a secret," he took another step closer, he and Jim were only a foot apart now "Well now I need you to trust me with that secret,"

Jim hadn't moved, still looking stubbornly down at the floor, but even he couldn't hide how badly his shoulders were shaking.

Emboldened, Toby reached out and laid both hands on Jim's shoulders, trying to steady him "I promise, whatever it is, whatever's going on at home, you can trust me. And if you tell me everything, right here right now, I promise I won't go to the cops. I don't want Dr.

Lake to go to jail any more than you do,”

It was true, he didn’t. His hope was that if he could get Jim to stand up to his mom the two of them could confront her and make Dr. Lake to go to therapy or counseling or something.

Jim glanced up, meeting Toby’s eyes, mouth twisting like he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

Toby felt his heart fluttering with hope. Hope he hadn’t dared to let himself feel before now.

Ths was it, Jim was going to tell him everything, then they could convince Mary, Claire, and Darci to back off, and make Dr. Lake get help, and they could all figure this out together and then Toby wouldn’t have to--

Without warning Jim dashed around him and ran out of the bathroom. Leaving Toby staring numbly at the door slowly swinging back and forth.

The hope that had been rising inside him just seconds ago had now fallen and lay shattered on the ground.

The disappointment of Jim turning away from him stung, but hadn’t been unexpected. The knowledge of what he had to do now made him queasy, but he had gotten better at powering through it.

But what hurt the most was realizing Jim didn’t trust him.

After everything they've been through, over ten years of being best friends, his only friend in Toby's case, when it came down to it Jim didn't *trust* him.

Not enough to share this.

Toby allowed himself a few minutes to let his emotions settle, before steeling himself and heading out the door, but not to his next class.

Once he did this there would be no going back. All the fun family stuff with Jim and Dr. Lake would stop cold. No more dinners. No more holidays. No more anything. Toby knew that and had made his peace with it. That's why he didn't get the girls involved with this choice, the fallout would land on him and him alone. And there would be fallout.

But Toby couldn't pull his punches now just because things were going to get ugly.

Swallowing his doubts, Toby forced himself to keep putting one foot in front of the other, even as his heart pounded faster with each step.

He'd been letting Jim down in a thousand different ways every day for the past decade.

Well one way or another, that ended *now*.

Chapter End Notes

> Those of you who follow my tumblr probably know about the polaroid pictures. To fill in the blanks Barbara started taking pictures of Jim at night on a regular basis to have a way to visually track his growth, polaroid so she wouldn't have to get

them developed. And over time it moved away from that more towards a secret family photo album of sorts.

I've also mentioned that a CPS investigation gets started on Barbara, which becomes a massive source of stress in Jim's life. But how much more would it wreck him if he found out that TOBY was the one who called them?

Next time: We see what Darci, Mary, and Claire decide to do about Jim's situation.

Walter and Louis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you *absolutely* certain?”

“Ja,” Otto’s blue eyes sparkled from behind his glasses, telltale golden glimmer flickering just below the surface “I would not waste your time for anything less, *Grand Commandant* ,”

Strickler detected the hint of a tease in Otto’s voice but chose to let it go, the square of vellum laid out on his desk occupying far more of his attention. Had he been a few centuries younger his hand might have shook as he traced the half faded lines of ink.

With this final piece; everything they’d been working for, himself, Otto, the entire order, was now within reach.

“Excellent,” he slid the vellum back towards Otto “I’ll need you on a plane to Mongolia immediately,”

Otto’s face fell, mouth shifting to form a protest.

“The eyestone is perhaps *the* most crucial piece of the bridge, I need someone I know is not only competent, but highly capable, to retrieve it. And you will have the full resources of the Janus order at your disposal,”

A touch thick with the flattery, and more than a little extravagant; but the order could afford it. Especially since if Otto’s information was

true Kilahead would be complete in less than a year. And Strickler felt reasonably confident that there would be little use for company shares and bond holdings once Gunmar reclaimed the surface.

Otto sat back, mollified for now “I will fly out tonight, with any luck I should be able to rendezvous with the Ulaanbaatar branch tomorrow evening, of course planning the expedition will take time. We are certain of the eyestone’s presence, but narrowing down its precise location won’t be--”

“Mr. Strickler?”

Neither of them flinched, far too experienced in the game for that, merely turned and sculpted their features to show appropriate levels of surprise and curiosity while Otto discreetly slid the vellum off the desk and back into his bag.

Tobias Domzalski hesitantly peeked in through the office door “Sorry, am I interrupting? I can come back later,”

“Nein,” Otto got to his feet “I was just leaving,”

“Oh, uh...ok,”

Toby stepped aside and let Otto pass, turning to watch him retreat down the hall with a look of piqued interest on his face.

“Mr. Domzalski?”

The boy snapped back to attention “Oh, uh sorry…..was that a friend of yours?”

“Oh yes, Otto and I go *way* back,” Strickler gestured for Toby to take a seat at the piano stool across from his desk that Otto had been occupying until just recently “He was just dropping by before heading off to a dig overseas, now what was it you needed?”

Toby sunk onto the stool, face flushed crimson “…am I that obvious?”

Strickler made sure the smile he gave him was only slightly patronizing “When you’ve been doing this as long as I have you get good at spotting these things, but it does look like you have something on your mind. Now what can I do for you?”

“It’s not for me-- and I don’t mean it’s about a friend of a friend that’s secretly me, I mean--” he cut off his babbling with a sharp intake of breath “It’s about Jim,”

Strickler raised an eyebrow “I applaud you for looking out for your friend’s grade point average, but if Jim is struggling in class it would be better if he comes and sees me himself,”

“Not…not help like that,”

His curiosity about Toby’s presence deepened into concern as he saw him shrink further in on himself, a shadow of the outgoing, slightly foolhardy boy he was used to “Jim’s having problems at home,”

The tightening of his fingers around his fountain pen was the only outward sign of the profound shock Strickler felt at that moment.

Problems at home.

The words every teacher dreads hearing.

Strickler pulled himself up straighter and leaned forward ever so slightly, filing all thoughts of Kilahead into the back of his mind to focus entirely on the matter at hand “What sort of problems at home?”

“His mom-- his mom…” he choked, the words almost seeming to physically pain him.

Strickler sat at attention and said nothing, waiting patiently. It might be difficult for him to voice this knowledge, but Toby would unburden himself in his own time.

“His mom locks him in the basement,” Toby said at last, voice cracking towards the end.

For the first time this afternoon the surprise on Strickler’s face was more genuine than not “What?”

He’d been occupying his cover as an educator for a few centuries now, and was fully cognizant of the things that could happen to his students behind closed doors, but rarely was it brought up so bluntly.

“Throws him in the basement and ties the door shut,” his tone took on a heavy darkness “I know because Jim basically admitted it, plus there are the photos,”

“Photos?”

Wordlessly, Toby took out his phone and taped the screen a few times before holding it out towards Strickler. He took the offered device and started thumbing through the gallery.

What he saw painted a very grim picture indeed.

And being experienced as he was, Strickler had a good feeling that he already knew the answer to his next question, but he had to ask it all the same “I agree that these photos are rather...damning, but you also said Jim also admitted this was taking place, may I ask why you’re here and he is not?”

If Toby had been punched in the stomach at that exact moment his expression would have been identical “Because ten seconds after admitting it he started denying it,”

He suspected something like this might be the case, but that didn’t mean he was happy about being right.

Strickler netted his fingers and let out a measured sigh “I can see why this would be difficult for you,”

“I-- it’s just…we said we’d help him, and he has to know this isn’t ok, so why would he…” Toby trailed off, voice thick with emotion and the beginnings of tears.

He could quite keep the tired look off his face as he watched Toby

hunch over and start to tremble, pondering the best way to respond.

There were dozens of potential answers to that question, none of them good. Fear of retaliation, misguided loyalty, twisted sense of familial obligation. Strickler settled on the one that would make the most sense given what he knew about the situation.

“Because it’s all he’s ever known,”

Toby looked up at him, eyes brimming.

Strickler leaned forward, voice as gentle as gauze “I don’t want to comment on something I know so little about, but when a person spends their whole life believing certain behaviors are normal, it can be difficult for them to recognize when they truly need help,”

“Yeah,” Toby said darkly “I can get that,”

It was at that moment Strickler remembered precisely how long Jim and Toby had known each other.

“Tobias, Jim’s situation is not your fault,”

“Oh yes it is!” Toby snapped at him with a surprising amount of force “I’ve known Jim for over a decade-- we’ve been in every class together since kindergarten! How could I not…”

He trailed off, last few words closer to sobs.

Strickler stood up from his desk and walked over to kneel down and look Toby in the eye “Because you were just a child yourself, because your friend’s safety should never have been your responsibility,”

“But it-- it--,” he hiccuped out the words, clearly trying desperately not to cry “ *It shouldn’t have taken me this long to notice!* ”

Tense silence filled Strickler’s office. He remained steadfast and unflinching from his position besides Toby for a few moments before speaking up again.

“Maybe the best time to come forward was ten years ago, but the second best time is now,”

Toby sniffled and raised his head to look him in the eye.

“It might have taken you a while to see these things, but the instant you realized what was going on with Jim you went to get him help. That’s all anyone can do, and is considerably more than what most chose to do,”

Strickler had been through this particular song and dance before, and he wasn’t so naive to believe that his words alone had the power to cure Toby of the raging storm of conflicted, contradictory emotions inside him, but seeing the boy wipe away his tears and hold himself just a little straighter, he knew that they’d helped somewhat.

Situation better in hand now, Strickler walked back around to sit at his desk “Thank you for bringing this to my attention, if you can email me those photos I will pass them, along with everything you’ve told me, down to the right people and make sure Jim’s situation is

thoroughly investigated,”

He paused, debating whether this last inclusion would be welcome or not “If you want to help Jim in the meantime, the best way is to try to stay close to him. I know it might be hard, but he’s going to need a friend more than anything in the coming weeks,”

“Ok…I’ll try,”

“Now, are you alright to go to your next class or do you need a moment?”

“I’ll-- I’ll email you the pictures, then I think I’m gonna….take five…for a little bit,” Toby said while pulling up his phone and not so discreetly rubbing his eyes.

Strickler nodded at him in acknowledgement while pulling out his laptop and searching his contacts for an email address he only used in the most dire of circumstances.

This situation should be followed up to the letter. It would take up more of his time than he’d prefer while also supervising the acquisition of the last few bridge pieces, but he couldn’t afford to do anything less. Kilahead may be nearing completion, but that was no reason to let his cover slack. If anything now more than ever it was important to maintain the facade. This close to the end any slip ups could undo centuries of hard work.

When he heard Toby sniffle again, Strickler very deliberately did not look up.

And although he would never admit as much, Strickler did feel somewhat sentimental towards his students. He prefered that they be allowed to enjoy the last few months of the world as they knew it in as much safety and comfort as possible.

Once Gunmar returned, any semblance of safety and comfort would vanish from their lives.

Still...these types of investigation proved to be tedious and lengthy even at the best of times. Extending from now to the bridge's completion was certainly a possibility

Perhaps if the situation was severe enough to warrant it he could arrange a late parent teacher conference on one of the nights Bular was due to pay him a visit….

Strickler had to stop a small chuckle from escaping his lips.

Pale lady forgive him, he really was going soft.

Louis muttered an ugly curse as his keys fell to the floor with a clatter. Dammit that was the third time this week he'd dropped his keychain while trying to hang it up. Were his reflexes starting to go or were the ten hour shifts just that draining?

Biting back a blue streak, he picked up and rehung his keys before slipping his shoes off and stepping into the front hall.

“Darci, you home?” he called out while continuing on to the living room “Dinner’s in the crockpot,”

Glancing around, Louis stopped in his tracks when he saw that Darci was indeed at home and sitting on the couch, her friends Mary and Claire sitting on either side of her. Normally this wouldn’t be any cause for concern, the three *were* practically joined at the hip, but their tensed shoulders and worried frowns told a different story.

“What happened, is everything ok?”

Darci briefly looked up and met his eyes, before tearing her gaze away with a grimace “No...not really,”

His hands tightened into fists “Who was it, who’s bothering you?” whatever punk out there that had dared upset his little girl was going to have Detective Louis Scott bring the wrath of god down on his scrawny--

“But not with me,” she looked from side to side “Or any of us,”

Just like that the wind was out of his sails “Oh,” calmer now, he stepped over and sank onto the easy chair across from them “Ok, then who?”

Her face twisted into a deep wince, Claire reaching up to put a comforting arm around her and picking up where she left off “You remember Jim, right Mr. Scott?”

Louis raised an eyebrow “Yes?”

He certainly remembered Darci and her friends spending a lot of time with two new boys almost immediately after starting high school. To say the least, he hadn't exactly been thrilled, but didn't try to interfere. Boys were a fact of life, and Darci was going to spend time with them whether he liked it or not. And he'd heard plenty of cautionary tales from other fathers about what happened when they hung on to their daughters too tightly. Besides, Darci had never given him any reason not to trust her judgement so Louis saw no reason to start now. So he made it his policy to let Darci spend her time how she wanted and with who she wanted, within reason of course. And on more than one occasion he had sat her down to discuss what kind of behaviors in other people were red flags and made it crystal clear that she could always go to him for advice and help. But for the most part he left her to her own devices, even when it set his nerves on edge to do so. After all, he very well couldn't spend her whole life chasing away boys with a baseball bat.

But he'd be lying if he said the idea didn't tempt him from time to time.

"Ok…What about Jim?"

Claire went gaunt and silent, Darci worked her jaw, struggling to get the words out "I-- it's…"

"His mom locks him in the basement," Mary blurted out for her.

For a moment Louis didn't know how to react, as a member of law enforcement and a mandated reporter, he consciously knew that if any of his friends or acquaintances wanted to report abuse of any kind he'd be the first person they'd go to. Better to talk to someone they already knew and trusted than a faceless government entity that may or may not actually take them seriously.

But knowing didn't prepare him for when it actually happened. When his daughter came to him and said one of her friends was in trouble. He'd met Jim on a few occasions, seen Dr. Lake in passing and spoken on the phone with her frequently. He seemed like an ok kid, she seemed like a nice enough woman, neither of them ever gave off any signs that something sinister was lurking beneath the surface.

Of course if this kind of thing was easy to spot there wouldn't be a need for detectives in the world.

He started mentally filing through the policies and procedures drilled into his skull "Did Jim tell you this himself or did you see something?"

They all shared an uncertain look, the silence continuing on for a few seconds before Mary spoke up again.

"We...saw something,"

"What kind of something?"

Darci shook off her discomfort first and pulled out her phone "Here," she tapped at the screen a few times and held it out to him "We took these at Jim's house, it's his basement door,"

Louis took the offered device and examined the screen. Going by the fact that they claimed Jim's mother was locking him in the basement, and that Darci said these were pictures of his basement door...even before he'd looked at the photos, Louis already had a good idea of what he would see.

Unfortunately he was right.

He shut his eyes and pulled in a deep breath, using years of practice to compartmentalize the mental image of daughter's friend and the pictures he'd just seen "You did the right thing by coming to me," he opened his eyes and looked back towards her "Now do you have any reason to believe that Jim is in immediate danger?"

She shook her head "No,"

"Can you describe how Jim and his mother interact?"

The girls took a second to ponder over the question "We don't really see much of Dr. Lake," Claire admitted "She's at work a lot, and we don't really hang out at his house much,"

"They always seemed…normal," Darci said slowly "But…there was that one time we were late coming back from the movies she was acting weird,"

He leaned forward ever so slightly "Weird how?"

"It was past Jim's curfew and he panicked and rushed home really quick, when he got inside his mom wouldn't let us come in and see him,"

Realization dawned on Mary's face even before she spoke up "Wait a second, doesn't she always chase us out the door pretty early on?"

“Yeah that’s right,” Claire said, Mary’s epiphany catching “She doesn’t like us hanging out there past his curfew,”

“Plus his curfew is crazy early,” Darci added “Like four o clock or something,”

“And he doesn’t do sleepovers, either going or having,” Mary added.

Sounds like Dr. Lake didn’t like Jim staying out and didn’t like his friends staying over. Could be run of the mill controlling or something worse. Too soon to tell.

“Aside from locking him in the basement, have any of you noticed any indication that his mother might be violent with him?”

“No,”

“Have any of you confirmed with Jim that he made these marks when he was locked in the basement and that they weren’t caused by something else?“

He saw the mixture of shock, hurt, and indignation fly across their faces and held up a hand “Not that I don’t believe you, I believe you girls one hundred percent, but when going forward into an investigation like this it’s important that all evidence is corroborated and accounted for,”

None of them responded right away. Darci and Claire looking flustered while Mary blushed scarlet before looking down and away.

Thanks to his experience in interrogations Louis had a pretty good idea why the three of them looked so guilty. They'd already tried confronting him and it had gone badly. Well nothing to do about that now.

"We...asked him," Darci said at last "He didn't say anything at first, but we could tell by the way he reacted that it was true,"

Louis nodded at that "Ok,"

"And then…." she swallowed deeply "I don't think he meant to, but he said that his mom hasn't put him down there since he was seven, and then he started saying that if we told anyone he would deny it,"

By the time she finished speaking her voice was tight and small.

Louis gripped the armrests to anchor himself, the fact that their friend was backpedalling to cover his mother and that he'd allegedly been locked in the basement since before he was seven years old weren't the worst things he'd seen in his career, didn't even make the top ten. But it was hard knowing that it had been his daughter's friend, a boy he'd seen and spoken with on more than a few occasions, that stung.

And seven years old….Jesus, no kid deserved that.

"Thank you for coming to me with this girls, I'm going to pass this information along and make sure an investigation is started with CPS,"

Darci nodded "Thanks dad,"

He pushed himself up straighter “Now I know the way your friend acted must have seemed very confusing,”

The trio nodded.

“I don’t want to make any assumptions about his home life, but I do know that when someone grows up in an abusive household, it really skews what they consider normal. I’ve known a lot of people that grew up with in dysfunctional families but didn’t even realize it until they were in their forties,”

He had to be really careful not to put his foot in his mouth for this next part “And the relationship between a child an abusive family member can be…complicated,” he raised a hand to rub the bridge of his nose, trying to prevent the tension headache he felt coming on “Things with them are rarely all bad all the time, most often there’s just enough good to keep the victim coming back,”

Too close to assumption territory, needed to bring this back on track.

“Regardless of what’s going on at home, Jim might try to do everything he can to protect his mother, even when he shouldn’t,”

Now for the tricky part.

He leaned forward and placed his hands on his knees “But in the meantime, you’re still going to be seeing Jim at school, right?”

The trio shared uncertain looks before Darci turned back towards him

“Yeah?”

“If you can it would be good to try and apologise for trying to force him to come forward so you can keep in communication,”

The three of them were stunned, as he’d expected, but this was something it looked like they’d have to learn sooner rather than later.

Darci was particularly taken aback “But we didn’t….”

Louis crossed his arms, raised an eyebrow, and gave her a look that he’d honed to perfection over fourteen years of parenting.

She trailed off, all of them fidgeting uncomfortably.

“I guess we were kind of…pushy,” Claire said while nervously tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“It’s ok, you didn’t know any better,” he let out a deep breath “Once I make the call and get the ball rolling things are going to get pretty hectic for him,”

He slowly turned his head looking at each of them in turn “Going forward keeping the lines of communication open is important, especially if things start going south for him at home. The best way to help is to just continue being his friends and to stop trying to get him to turn on his mother,”

“So wait…” Mary sounded confused “You want us to just ignore the

fact his mom locks him in the basement and pretend like everything's normal?"

"Not….quite," Louis sat back with a grimace "For whatever reason your friend clearly isn't ready to come forward with this, so the best thing to do is be supportive in any other way you can,"

"Now," he netted his hands together "You girls should *not* ignore any signs that further abuse is taking place, whether it's something you see or something Jim says. But if he's made it clear that he's willing to outright lie, pushing him would do more harm than good. So if you ever do suspect anything else is happening, don't confront him, but try and document it in any way you can and bring it to me,"

Louis let out a deep breath, knowing the worst part of this converstaion was about to come "In child abuse investigations not a lot happens right away. It often involves observing behavior patterns over a long period of time," he steeled himself before he said the part he knew was going to break their hearts "And it's more common than anyone would like to admit that not much comes of them,"

His chest tightened looking at their stricken faces, but he pushed forward.

"Which is why it's so crucial to try and maintain your relationship with him, even if whatever investigation we start now doesn't pan out to anything, if you stay on friendly terms, then you can still help him months, maybe even years down the line, do you understand all that?"

Darci's looked crushed, expression barely concealing the horror he knew she must be feeling, and mirrored by both of her friends, but she responded all the same "Ok Dad,"

The other two girls forced themselves to reply as well.

“Got it,”

“Will do Mr. Scott,”

He looked over them carefully “So are you girls all doing ok?”

“Yep,”

“Yes,”

“Uh huh,”

“Good, and I promise I’m going to file all this first thing tomorrow,” he glanced at his watch “It’s getting late; Claire, Mary, we’re going to eat pretty soon, care to join us?”

Both girls shook their heads “No thanks,” Claire said “My mom’s expecting me back for dinner,”

“Do either of you need a ride?”

“It’s ok,” Mary added “We came here on our bikes so we can get home in plenty of time,”

“Alright, but don’t feel rushed, you two can stay here as long as you like,”

The two glanced at Darci, who gave her head a single shake.

“Actually we should really get going,” Claire stood up, pulling Mary up alongside her “Thanks again Mr. Scott,”

“Anytime girls, and I mean it,”

They turned back just long enough to wave and headed out the door, leaving just the two Scotts inside.

“You sure you’re doing ok pumpkin?”

“Dad I’m *fine* ,” she forced the words out through one of the fakest smiled he’d ever seen “I’m just glad that Jim is going to get some help,”

“Well just remember, I’m always available whenever you aren’t fine. Even if you do something stupid like breaking and entering, I promise I’ll be more supportive than mad,”

She rolled her eyes “ *Da-ad!* Just because you broke into the old vespa factory when you were in high school doesn’t mean everyone does!”

He chuckled “I know, but humor your old man, and go set the table while you’re at it, I’m getting hungry,”

Darci let out an impressively loud groan before getting up and obediently heading to the kitchen.

Louis watched her go, smile dropping off his face as she vanished from sight.

Part of him wanted to leap on what was clearly Darci pretending to be better than she felt, but he stopped himself. He had made it clear that he was available, now it was on her to reach out when she was ready.

He'd done his best to prepare her and her friends for some of the hard realities of this situation, but there were some things he hoped they never had to learn.

Louis had seen more than a few domestic abuse cases cross his desk. And on two occasions he had seen with his own two eyes just how ugly the endings to these cases could be.

He hoped to god this wasn't going to turn into number three.

Chapter End Notes

> You know the scene in Arcadia's Most Wanted where Detective Scott brings Toby into an interrogation room and starts grilling him about dating his daughter. Yeah, I didn't like it. Not only should he have lost his job at least six times over, it's a prime example of the worst of the Overprotective Dad trope. I hate this trope a lot. It undermines the daughter's autonomy in choosing her romantic partners and reinforces the idea that she can't be trusted to look out for her own well being, it also normalizes adult men behaving violently towards teenage boys.
>
> From the beginning I knew that Detective Scott was going to be a major player in this story and I wanted to take his protectiveness in a different direction. As a parent and a member of law

enforcement who's seen some of the worst humanity has to offer, he's not incorrect for being concerned for his daughter's safety. But instead of having Scott undermining his daughter and making decisions on her behalf, he trusts her judgement and empowers her with the knowledge and skills to look after herself, while letting her know that he's always willing to go to bat for her if she so desires.

Ok that's enough time on my soapbox for today.

And fun fact, Detective Scott's first name, Louis, comes from the tie-in novel "Angor Reborn". Although I'm not sure if it's intended to be pronounced Loo-ee or Loo-iss.

Next time, Jim finally starts talking to his friends again.

Jim

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: descriptions of raw meat, mentions of violence, toxic thought patterns.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You know hon, you’re going to have to talk to Toby eventually.”

Jim jolted, smacking the top of his head against the underside of the cabinet, it didn’t hurt in the slightest, but the loud crunch as he made contact did *not* bode well for the cabinet.

Barbara winced and set her coffee mug down on the table “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,”

Jim pulled back and stood up straight, grimacing when he caught sight of the broken boards and deep gouges his horns had left in the wood. They were going to have to hire someone to come in and fix that “It’s ok,”

“I’m just...concerned, if you two are having problems things aren’t going to get better unless you both address them,”

“Yeah, I know,”

He regretted the flippant words as soon as he said them, getting a glimpse of the look of hurt and worry on his mom’s face.

“Can you tell me why you guys are fighting?” she said softly

Jim looked away, turning his eyes back down to his...food on the counter “It’s complicated,”

It didn’t look like that answer satisfied Barbara at all, but rather than push further she just frowned and went back to her breakfast.

Jim felt bad for being so evasive, but that was vastly overshadowed by just how relieved he was that she was willing to drop it. He finished grabbing the empty jars and frozen plastic wrapped rabbit and headed over to the table to join her. Eating this close to sunrise usually gave him wicked stomach cramps, but he’d put it off for too long already, and he was too hungry to wait another hour and a half to eat a normal breakfast.

So he didn’t waste any time downing all the jars and getting started on the rabbit.

“Are just you and Toby having problems, or does this involve the girls to?”

Jim froze mid bite, a fresh wave of guilt and anxiety crashing into him. The hand holding the half eaten rabbit dropped down to the table. He hung his head, the weight of his horns tugging it down even further. Even without looking he could practically feel the hurt on his mom’s face, which made him feel even worse.

“I’m sorry, I know I’m prying, but I’m worried about you,”

He heard her setting down her fork and clasping her hands together “I don’t want you to feel like you have to tell me everything that goes on with you and your friends, but…”

Barbara sighed “I was young once to. I know how high emotions can run, and how the littlest things seem to matter so much-- but they aren’t worth throwing your friendships away,”

Jim risked raising his head to look at her better. Briefly meeting her eyes and getting a peek of her melancholy smile.

As soon as she caught sight of him, Barbara sat up a little straighter and continued, emboldened by the eye contact “If you did something wrong, and I’m not saying you did, avoiding them won’t make it go away. Things can’t get better if you don’t apologize and start rebuilding trust. And if one of them did something to upset you…”

She paused, pulling in a deep breath “Then you have every right to feel hurt and angry, but you need to tell them that. Your friends can’t read your mind, you need to communicate how you’re feeling with them,”

Expectant silence filled the air, Barbara’s gaze stayed on him, patiently waiting for his response.

Jim forced himself to maintain eye contact, very deliberately did not ball his hands into fists, and only opened his mouth to speak once he was sure he could do it in a neutral tone of voice “You’re right...I’ll try to talk to them at lunch today, see if we can clear the air”

Whether she actually believed him or saw the cracks in his facade and decided not to push him further, Barbara’s only response was to smile, give a soft ‘I think that’s a great idea’, and go back to eating.

Which made him feel ten times worse about the fact that he intended

to do no such thing.

He looked back down at the rabbit in his hand, stomach in knots. Even though it was the absolute last thing he felt like doing, Jim lifted the rabbit back up and forced himself to take another bite.

When you mess up you need to apologize, when your friends mess up you need to let them know that they hurt you.

But what do you do when it's both of those things? Or maybe even neither?

He knew his mom was only trying to help, but this was way out of her league.

Jim wasn't trying to keep secrets or shut her out. But Toby and the girls were straight up accusing her of abuse. How could telling her do anything but hurt her?

They had threatened to send her to prison for crying out loud.

And maybe he was wrong or maybe they were, but bottom line, Jim couldn't tell Toby and the girls the truth.

If this was how they reacted to just some scratches on a door...he couldn't risk it.

He swallowed and glanced at what was left of the rabbit through the plastic, butchered and cleaned but still very clearly a rabbit, the ends

he'd been chewing on bright red and bloody.

There was a monster here all right, but it wasn't his mom.

Jim forced down the last of the macabre excuse of what passed for his breakfast and hurried back into the kitchen to start on their lunches. When it was time for Barbara to leave she kissed him on the cheek and thanked him before heading out the door.

And didn't say anything about the fact he'd just made two instead of three, even though he knew she'd noticed.

He did his best to avoid thinking about it; but before he knew it the sun was up, he was normal again, and it was time to leave for school.

Jim sluggishly changed out of his now baggy t-shirt and jeans into his regular clothes, threw his messenger bag over his shoulder, and forced himself out the door, making a bee line for his bike. It didn't look like Toby was waiting around to ambush him. But Jim didn't want to give any openings just in case he was hiding in the bushes, which he'd tried a few days ago.

Fortunately that didn't happen, and Jim was able to start pedaling to school in peace.

As glad as he was about being about to get to school without having to dodge a confrontation, Jim had definitely been taking Toby's presence on their morning ride for granted. Less than two weeks and he already couldn't stand the silence.

But as much as it sucked that's just the way things had to be now.

All too soon he pulled up to the school. Jim headed around the building towards the bike rack, not one of the ones he and Toby liked to use, but the one near the gym that Steve and his cronies frequented. Hopefully they'd already gone in and Jim could avoid running into them directly.

His heart sank when he pulled up and saw Steve and Logan chatting by the end of the rack. So much for avoiding confrontation. Trying to be as discreet as possible, Jim quietly dismounted and started locking in his bike on the opposite side of the rack from them, praying to go unnoticed.

Unfortunately he wasn't that lucky.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing, parking your dweeby bike next to ours?" Steve stomped over, a snickering Logan right on his heels.

Jim slammed his lock shut, what little remained of his patience gone "I thought that when people saw my lame bike next to your cool one it would make yours look better by comparison," he said in a complete deadpan.

Steve's face blanked as he faltered, unable to come up with a response. Jim tried to take advantage of the lull to get away, but he wasn't quick enough. Steve stepped in front of him and snarled, looming in his personal space to block his exit.

"You'd better tell me what your game is!"

Jim met Steve's gaze without flinching, normally he wouldn't try to butt heads with a guy who was called 'Psycho Steve' for darn good

reason, but after everything he'd been through in the past week and a half Jim couldn't be bothered to tip toe around him right now "Figure it out yourself Steve, because believe it or not I have bigger problems than your microscopic IQ,"

In hindsight that had probably been the worst thing he could have said. Steve's face darkened, arm shooting out and grabbing Jim's collar.

Logan, still hovering behind him, let out a short laugh "Wrong answer Lake," he said with a smirk.

Steve didn't say anything, slowly raising his other hand in a fist. Jim winced preemptively and tried to brace himself for the coming blow.

But just before Steve could start rearranging his teeth, Coach Lawrence poked his head out of the gym door, causing all three of them to jump in surprise "Class starts in five minutes, everyone cut the chit chat and get in here!"

He snapped his head in their direction "Kish, Palchuk, that means you!"

Steve growled, but dropped his fist. The second Coach ducked back inside he shoved Jim into the bike rack before stomping towards the gym.

"This isn't over *Crybaby,* "

He stalked off, Logan following shortly after.

Jim glowered at Steve's retreating back before pulling himself up and heading to his own class.

Getting teeth pulled was more fun than spending any time within a ten foot radius of Steve, but it was still better than the burning, queasy feeling he got in his gut whenever Toby, Claire, Mary, or Darci looked at him.

He breathed deeply and tried to force the sudden spike of stress down to a manageable level, Jim knew they meant well, he really did, and he knew all this stuff with curfews and scratched doors was scaring them, but he *couldn't* tell them.

Last week had been the closest he'd ever come to spilling the beans, when Toby had jumped him in the bathroom, begging Jim to tell him the truth, promising he wouldn't go to the cops, Jim had almost done it. He had been so close to just unloading and telling Toby *everything.* But at the last second he'd bolted. Later once he'd had time to sit down and really think about what had just happened, he'd been really glad that he didn't.

No matter how much Toby and the girls begged and demanded and insisted Jim could trust them with the truth, the fact was he just couldn't, no matter how much he did or didn't want to.

He fumbled with dial in an effort to open his locker.

Jim was a monster, and worse a liar. If the girls ever figured out what he really was...well they wouldn't run screaming in terror that's for sure. Maybe Darci would, but chances are she'd be helping Claire decapitate him while Mary filmed the whole thing. And Toby…

His throat tightened unexpectedly, struggling to grab his textbooks as his hands started to shake. That was the worst part, deep down he just didn't know how Toby would react. Would he be crushed by the knowledge that his 'best friend' had never been what he'd seemed? Horrified that he'd never spotted the monster living across the street from him? Furious that Jim had lied to him for over a decade?

Knowing Jim's luck it would be some unholy combination of all three.

Shutting his locker with much more force than needed, he turned down the hall towards Señor Uhl's room.

So telling the truth was off the table, but the four of them had made it clear that they weren't going to let this go any time soon. And they still had the pictures, and the recording Mary made.

Jim had been on edge for days after they'd first confronted him. Terrified that they'd gone ahead to the police with their evidence, and at any moment cops bust open the door and drag his mom away in handcuffs.

But a few days passed without incident, aside from hundreds of texts from all four of them, not an exaggeration, literally hundreds, Jim had slowly allowed himself to relax.

That and the fact that they were still badgering him told Jim that they needed more than just the photos and the audio to go to the police with, they needed him to. And if he didn't go along with them there was nothing they could do to his mom.

Of course that didn't explain why his phone had been disturbingly silent for the past two days.

He shook off the worries, Jim had more than enough of those right now, the last thing he needed was to go inventing more. If his friends had realized they couldn't get him to say anything well then good for them. The important thing was for Jim to stay silent and not respond to their prying, in person or over the phone. As a long term solution it sucked, but he wasn't about to get better alternatives any time soon.

His stomach was constantly in knots and it felt like he was walking on eggshells 24/7, but he couldn't take the risk of dropping his guard even a little.

Jim rounded the corner only to freeze midstep. Two people were standing on the other end of the hall quietly chatting with each other. But not just any two people; Toby and Mary. And at the sound of his footsteps their gazes swiveled towards him, piercing him on the spot.

His heart rate tripled.

Ok, no big deal, looks like he was taking the long way to spanish today.

Heart still going a mile a minute, Jim pivoted on his heel, stopping dead when he saw Claire and Darci in the hall behind him, blocking any escape.

Two might be a coincidence, but four? No way. This was an ambush, how long had they been planning this?

Now that he was pinned from either side, they started walking towards him.

Yep, definitely an ambush.

Jim tightened his grip on the strap of his bag. Stay calm, they might have cornered him but they couldn't make him talk. And if he didn't talk they couldn't get anything that they could use to press charges against his mom. The five of them couldn't stay here in the hall forever, sooner or later a teacher would come by to shuffle them all off to their classes. All Jim needed to do was stay quiet and wait them out.

The four stopped their approach at about three feet away. Jim braced himself, getting ready for the onslaught of begging and accusations.

Toby stepped up to him, breaking the silence "Jim, you don't have to say anything, I-- we just need to tell you…" he dropped his gaze "We're sorry, *I'm* sorry,"

Jim's jaw dropped.

He what?

There were no words any one of them could have said that would have floored him more. He wondered if he'd actually heard Toby correctly. Right now Jim was too stunned to even react.

"All of us are," Claire chimed in "We shouldn't have pushed so hard, especially after you told us we were wrong,"

For over a week Jim had been hoping against hope for them to just

drop this and back off, but now that that was, apparently, happening it almost didn't seem real. If it weren't for the fact that the school wasn't made of gingerbread and he still had his pants on Jim would've thought that he was dreaming "I-- you-- you what?"

Darci looked nervously from side to side "Can we take this into the computer lab?" she gestured to the door off to the side "Somewhere a *little* more private than the hallway?"

"Uh...ok,"

They all stepped into the unoccupied room, Darci flicking on the lights and Toby pulling the door shut behind them.

Meanwhile the shock had subsided and suspicion was starting to creep in.

Did they really want to let this go, or were they just trying to get him to drop his guard?

Jim leaned against one of the desks in a way that he hoped came off as casual "So…what exactly is it you guys are saying?"

Toby grimaced "We shouldn't have kept forcing the issue of the whole basement thing and your curfew the way we did, if you say everything with you and Dr. Lake is cool….we believe you,"

Jim slowly turned to look each of them in the eye, trying to spot any traces of nervousness or dishonesty "Are you guys for real on this?"

“Yeah,” Darci stepped forward “This is your family, as soon as you said everything was fine we should have just butted out,”

Claire came up beside her “That goes for all of us, we’re really sorry we pushed it too far and made you uncomfortable,”

Jim didn’t quite know what to think, on one hand this was exactly what he’d dreamed of happening for over a week, but on the other…there was one person here who hadn’t said anything yet, who was known for having a stubborn streak powerful enough to crush diamonds.

He turned towards Mary, not even trying to hide the distrust on his face “Then what about the recording you made?”

In the second biggest twist of the day, Jim was taken aback to see that Mary actually looked genuinely…remorseful “I lied, I didn’t record anything,” she came up to him and plopped her phone into his hand “Check for yourself, and you can go ahead and delete the pictures of the….racoon scratches,”

Her voice dropped “And I’m sorry to…”

Jim heard her apology, but for the most part he was preoccupied with the device in his hand. To be honest he’d been starting to think this all sounded too good to be true; but if Mary was actually letting him go through her *phone* --

He still couldn’t believe he was holding it, it was like being handed the holy grail, only somehow more sacred.

Only about a minute or so of browsing through her phone and Jim knew Mary was telling the truth, the photos of the scratched door were there, she hadn't sent them to anyone. And there was no audio recording in her main files or her autobackup.

A tiny part of Jim was ticked that she'd tried to trick him using an imaginary recording, but that was eclipsed by the *enormous* relief he felt that the damning words he'd said had never been captured in the first place.

It was like a massive weight being lifted off his shoulders as Jim permanently deleted the photos of the basement door. After handing the phone back he looked around at everyone, torn between his remaining doubts and giddiness at the idea that this may be over after all.

"So you guys are really going to stop bugging me about my curfew and rules and everything?"

They all nodded.

"Yep,"

"Absolutely,"

"One hundred percent,"

Toby came up to him and put a hand on his shoulder, smiling wide "At lunch today what do you say we meet up at the food truck, figure out what we're going to do over spring break, and forget all this ever happened?"

A tiny smile of his own curled on Jim’s face “Sounds great,”

They all filled out of the computer lab, Jim was last, flicking off the light switch as they left, actually relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Against all odds Toby and the girls had actually decided to let it go.

Jim felt so light he was practically walking on air. It was over. This horrible, screwed up mess was *finally* over. His secret was safe, his mom was safe. He wouldn’t have to spend every day swinging back and forth between anxiety and crippling loneliness. Jim could actually talk to his friends again, go back to actually having a life.

For the first time in a long time things were looking up.

Chapter End Notes

I could find any sources for Logan's last name, so I've decided to make Logan's last name Kish. No real meaning behind it, I just got it from one of my coworkers.

And Mary most certainly shared those photos with other people, she's just darn good at covering her digital tracks.

In this au Barbara and Jim are better at communicating (better, not perfect) this is due in part to both necessity and availability. Because of just how isolating Jim's troll curse is he literally has no one else to confide in, and will open up more to Barbara about his personal troubles than in canon. That being said, both of them are guilty of omitting things and telling little white lies to each other in order to try and protect them, which is going to cause problems for both of them down the line.

Another by-product of the isolating nature of Jim's curse is that's its caused him to develop some pretty toxic thought patterns with regard to his troll form. He assumes the worst of himself and assumes others will to. It's understandable to an extent, but at a

certain point he really needs to start giving his friends more credit. They've been nothing but kind and accepting to him, and it's not fair for Jim to assume that they'd respond poorly without even giving them a chance.

At this point Toby and Claire/Darci/Mary don't know that the other one also reported Jim's situation to CPS. After their talk with Det. Scott Mary contacted Toby with something like "I think it was a mistake to push Jim so hard, we're going to apologize if you want to join us" Toby was all too happy to have the girls seemingly drop the issue and help break the ice for him and agreed almost instantly. Unfortunately this communication mish-mosh is going to make an already bad situation even worse.

Barbara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The brochure had been feather light when Barbara had picked it up at the travel agency earlier today, but now it felt like there was a brick in her purse.

It took a great deal of effort to keep her eyes on the road and not on the handbag sitting in the passenger seat.

Ever since Barbara had seen that magazine article all those months ago, in the back of her mind she always knew how ridiculous it sounded. Her son's nightly transformation being linked to seventeenth century witch trials that had happened on the other side of the country; no matter which way you cut it, it was a stretch. Nix that, even a stretch started from somewhere rational, this was a half-baked, half-assed, barely-plausible, hypothesis.

But she couldn't let it go without making *sure* . The odds of finding anything might be slim to none, but Barbara couldn't risk letting a cure slip through her fingers.

And she'd already done all the research she could from California, the only thing left was to go to Massachusetts and look for answers there.

It wouldn't be an easy trip, by any stretch of the word. Taking a plane was theoretically possible but in practicality way too risky, and it was much too far for her to drive them. Their journey was going to involve switching between buses and trains and stopping at different motels each night. But maybe, just maybe, three thousand miles away, they would find the answers they were looking for.

A lead weight sank into the pit of her abdomen as the house came into view.

Logistics aside, what worried Barbara the most was that in all the research she'd done the past few months, there was *nothing* suggesting that there was actual magic involved in the Salem witch trials. Nada. Zip. Zilch. And mounds and mounds of evidence to suggest colonial mass hysteria and a gigantic coincidence based on a common name. Knowing that, the thought of dragging them both to the other side of the country, only to find nothing....

That scared her.

But not because she was afraid of failing, Barbara had plenty of opportunities to get used to *that* over the past ten years, but because this was it. Their last clue, the final stone to unturn, the end of the line. If they didn't find anything on this trip…

Her throat tightened as the house came into view.

Then it was over, for good.

Turning to pull into the driveway, she was surprised by the presence of an unfamiliar Niesan parked on the sidewalk. Usually they didn't get many strangers in their little cul de sac, maybe it was a salesman, or Jehova's Witnesses. Either way she had bigger things to worry about. Putting it out of her mind, Barbara pulled into the driveway and killed the ignition; five breaths in, hold for five, out for five more.

The conversation she was about to have with Jim was going to be

rough. No matter how tactful she was there was no way he was going to react well to hearing about the Salem Witch hypothesis she'd been sitting on for months, much less how she was planning on taking them to the east coast for a good chunk of the summer.

But as much as she was tempted to, Barbara couldn't put off telling him forever.

Best to not drag her feet any longer and rip the bandaid right off.

Steeling herself with a final deep breath, Barbara grabbed her purse, stepped out of the car, and marched up to the front door.

"Jim?" she peeked inside "Are you--"

The rest of the sentence died in her throat.

There was a man, not a particularly threatening looking one but still a stranger to her, sitting on their staircase, going through their clean laundry basket like he owned it.

She froze midstep; the picture in front of her too baffling to form a coherent reaction to.

The man glanced up at her from the basket "Oh Dr. Lake, glad to see you here,"

"I-- you-- who-- who are you? What are you doing in my house?"

The man didn't answer, instead a new voice cut in "Hello Dr. Lake, how about you join us in the living room?"

Still bewildered beyond all belief, Barbara found herself moving towards the living room. Stepping around the corner, the first thing she noticed was a woman, just as unthreatening and unfamiliar as the man on the stairs, sitting on their couch and smiling at her. It was the second thing she noticed that caused her confusion to shift into concern.

Jim, sitting bolt upright on the other side of the couch facing the woman, plastic smile carved into his face "Hi mom, welcome home,"

Barbara just stood there frozen in the door frame. What was happening, these people didn't look or act like burglars or home invaders….but who were they? What were they doing here? And why was Jim so on edge and desperate not to show it?

"What is….going on?"

"Oh I'm sorry, let me introduce myself," the woman stood and held up an ID badge "My name is Dorothy Butler, you can call me Dorrie, I'm an investigator with CPS,"

For a second it felt like time had stopped.

Then Dorrie,

The child protective services investigator

Held out her hand, and everything became *painfully* real.

Forcibly snapping herself out of it, Barbara reached out and shook the offered hand, willing herself not to tremble, and returned Dorrie's smile with one of her own. Panicked scream ringing silently in her skull.

Dorothy Butler.

CPS investigator.

A fist to the gut would have been less shocking and painful.

Who had called, what had they seen? Had it been their routine made someone suspicious, or had they seen something more--

Barbara clamped down on that thought *hard,* walking over and taking a seat at the couch next to Jim, using years of practice as an ER doctor to compartmentalize and stay composed.

For whatever reason these people were here, right now it was vital for Barbara to maintain a level head. Keep calm, tread carefully, figure out what exactly had brought these people to their home, and what it would take for them to leave.

Besides, if someone had seen something...telling, it wouldn't be CPS that came knocking on the door.

“Sorry I guess I’m just...a little confused, why are you here, who called you?”

Dorrie’s porcelain smile didn’t so much as twitch “Someone came to us concerned that about the disciplinary methods going on in your household, but I’m afraid I can’t tell you who, that information is confidential,”

Not the answer she’d been hoping for, but not an unexpected one. Even with the waves of dread it sent through her.

Barbara leaned over to get a better look at the man still sitting on the stairs “So who is…”

“That’s Detective Charles Lunau, he’s my police escort,”

“I’m sorry your what now?”

“It’s nothing to be concerned about,” Dorrie’s expression instantly switched from chipper to contrite “It’s just standard department procedure,”

Barbara had more questions but bit her tongue, it would not be in her, or Jim’s, best interests to come off as defensive right now.

But her brain was starting to catch up to her surroundings. And anger was starting to rise past the shock.

“I know you’re with child protective services, but you can’t come in to

my house, talk to my son, without--"

Dorrie whipped a folded piece of paper out of her bag and held it towards Barbara "Here's your copy of the search warrant, please feel free to look it over and keep it for your records,"

The bottom dropped out of her stomach for the second time today. From beside her she could see Jim flinch.

Barbara numbly reached out and took the paper, a quick glance revealing the seals and signatures that meant it was official. Turning the anger in her veins to ice.

An investigation was one thing, anyone could shoot their mouth off and get CPS to come sniffing around. But a warrant meant that not only had someone reported them, but they had given something concrete enough for someone else to take it to a judge and get him to put down his signature.

More than that, a warrant meant that Dorrie and Charles could look where they wanted, talk to who they wanted, and stay as long as they darn well pleased.

Which meant that now Barbara *really* had to play nice.

"Well then…" she took a deep, grounding breath "How can I help you?"

Dorrie beamed, clearly pleased at the cooperation "Right now we're just trying to get a feel for how things are in your household, Jim and I were already talking about some things, now I'd like the three of us

to talk together, does that sound good?"

"Yes...that would be fine,"

"Great, then let's get started," she pulled over a notebook that had been sitting on the coffee table "Besides Jim and yourself, who comes and goes from your home on a regular basis?"

"No one I think, it's mostly just us-- Oh! Except for Jim's friends, they come around fairly regularly,"

He nodded along with her words "Yeah, and they're all pretty well behaved, straight A's and all that stuff,"

Dorrie quickly scrawled something in her notebook "What are your friends' full names?"

Jim frowned but answered all the same "Toby Domzalski, Claire Nuñez, Darci Scott, Mary Wang,"

A few more notes and Dorrie paused her pen and looked up "And how are your grades Jim, any areas where you're struggling in school?"

"No not really, all A's and B's and stuff,"

"I can send you a copy of Jim's most recent report card if that would help," Barbara added.

Dorrie beamed “That would be great, now can you tell me what kind of family activities you two do together?”

Barbara and Jim turned towards each other simultaneously.

“We…go camping pretty often,” Barbara said haltingly.

“Yeah, kind of our thing, love the great outdoors,” Jim let out an awkward chuckle.

“Good good,” Dorrie turned towards Barbara, smile shifting into something more somber “Now how do punishments and discipline work in your house?”

Her heart skipped a beat “There aren’t really any huge issues, Jim’s never had behavioral problems severe enough for me to be deeply concerned about discipline,” she risked a peek at Jim from the corner of her eye, for the most part he appeared calm, but his face had gone deathly pale.

“On the rare occasions I do find a punishment necessary, it’s usually grounding from video games or electronics, how long depends on the severity of the situation,”

Dorrie’s smile slid back into place as she jotted down another note “I know a lot of households operate at different hours, so do you have any kind of set curfew in place?”

“Yes…” Barbara continued “Four pm during the winter and six pm after daylight savings,”

“Why did you pick those hours?”

Barbara paused, and very deliberately did not look towards Jim “I think it's safer that he’s home before dark,”

In her peripheral vision she could see Jim stiffen.

Her chest tightened. She just got a sinking feeling she’d just said something she shouldn’t.

Dorrie’s only response was to keep smiling and jot down another note “So between school and work how do you--”

“Actually I have a question,”

Barbara over to see Detective Lunau coming into the room holding the laundry basket “Are you dating anyone Dr. Lake?”

She was momentarily taken aback “I’m sorry, what?”

“As of this moment are you currently dating or in a romantic relationship?”

“No. No I’m not. I haven’t dated anyone for years,”

He set down the basket and pulled out something on top. Her breath

hitched when she saw it was one of Jim's pajama shirts.

"Do you mind telling me who this belongs to?"

"That's mine," Jim piped up, startling her.

Lunau looked at the shirt, then back at Jim, frowning "Seems pretty big for you,"

Jim's smile slipped just a fraction "I like baggy clothes..."

Going by the look on Lunau's face he found this hard to believe. Jim trailed off, tension in the room rising.

"Ok," Dorrie abruptly broke the silence, shutting her notebook and getting to her feet "How about we all take a break and go look around the house?"

This new development had problems of its own, but Barbara was mainly relieved that the subjects of clothes and her social life were being dropped "That's fine,"

Dorrie grinned at her "Great,"

The rest of them stood and followed her towards the stairs. Lunau held back to let them pass, and then followed them up.

Meanwhile Barbara was still trying to reassemble her mind. Trying to

gather her thoughts felt like herding bees, but she needed to get it together and figure out what they had laying around the house that needed to be tucked out of sight, or at the least they should come up with a very good explanation for.

She only remembered right as they all stepped up to Jim's bedroom door.

They all reacted the instant Dorrie pulled it open; Dorrie herself flinched and took half a step back, both her and Charles cringing, Jim had gone even paler and Barbara had to fight to keep a wince off her face.

Frowning for the first time since Barbara had seen, Dorrie turned back and addressed her "Can you tell me about this smell?"

Barbara just stood there, hoping she didn't look as much like a deer in headlights as she felt.

The smell wasn't anything overly rotten, halfway between vegetation and musk, but it was distinctly animal. And it got even more noticeable after Jim started puberty. At first Barbara had been vigilant about scrubbing it out of his clothes and sheets as soon as it started to linger. Until Jim had admitted he couldn't stand the way soap and air freshener smelled when he was blue. Since then they'd decided to more or less let the scent go in his room while making sure to keep it out of the rest of the house.

None of which she could say to the woman in front of her.

Not to mention that she'd just now recalled the *other* thing that was unusual about Jim's room.

“I…it’s--”

“It’s my fault,” Jim said abruptly, causing every head in the room to swivel towards him.

He flushed under the scrutiny “I’m…bad about washing my sheets and stuff,”

Dorrie, still frowning, jotted something down in her notebook before looking back up “Is it ok if we go inside Jim?”

His face was tight “Sure….”

Jim stepped ahead of them and pushed open the door, allowing them to file in before he followed suit.

Barbara’s insides knotted as he shut the door behind him.

Dorrie stumbled a little bit, the space was cramped with four of them in it, before glancing between Barbara and Jim, looking equal parts confused and concerned “Is there any particular reason your bed is so messy?”

This time Barbara knew the flinch showed on her face. Calling it messy was being generous.

During the little time that Jim slept at night he tossed and turned

aggressively, inevitably making tangled nests out of sheets rather than sleeping under them. It had taken years of work and a special hypoallergenic fitted sheet to keep Jim from tearing the mattress apart. But they still couldn't keep him from tangling up the sheets.

Jim forced out an uncomfortable laugh "Guess I'm just bad about making it…"

Dorrie briefly held his gaze before looking towards Barbara.

Barbara knew that she was waiting for her to say something regarding Jim's bedding situation, to step in as his parent and caretaker and provide a good explanation.

But she couldn't speak past the lump of static in her throat, teeth digging into her lip.

After a few moments of loaded silence Dorrie quietly raised her ever present book and took down another note.

"How about we look at the bathroom?"

The bathroom was, mercifully, normal. But Barbara had to force herself not to glance out the window at the steadily setting sun while Dorrie rifled through their medicine cabinet.

They were running against the clock here, sunset was in less than an hour and she didn't know how long Dorrie and Chalres were planning on staying. And the warrant meant that they weren't leaving until they were good and ready.

And the way he kept tugging at his sleeve and glancing at his watch told her the time hadn't escaped Jim's notice either.

After finding nothing amiss in the bathroom or her bedroom, they soon found themselves back downstairs; Dorrie casually peeking inside their fridge and cabinets "How do you handle meal times with Jim's school and your irregular hours,"

Finally an easy question "I try to keep a good supply of snacks and ready-to-eat meals on hand, we go shopping together once a week to get everything we need," Barbara said, Jim nodding along in agreement with her "Jim enjoys cooking and does a lot of our meals together, We try to to eat together as often as possible, but there will be some nights I leave Jim to find his own dinner,"

"What about chores and housework?"

This question was a bit trickier, Barbara hadn't even thought of the best way to answer before Jim piped up.

"I--"

"Jim," Dorrie interrupted, not unkindly "I know you're trying to be helpful, but I really need to hear this from your mom,"

He clapped his mouth shut, face red, all eyes in the room slowly turning towards Barbara.

"We...try to split things up pretty equally. I do clean and cook on my

days off, and Jim has a chore list and contributes to meals when he's up for it,"

Barbara glanced around the room, Dorrie's face was still a neutral mask, but Lunau was frowning darkly and Jim was positively ashen.

A cold lump dropped in her ribcage. She knew she had just said the wrong thing.

How many times did that make now?

This was too much, she couldn't keep doing this, guessing and trying to give the right answer. She was already on edge, and didn't know how many more straws she could take before she snapped.

"I'm tired," Jim spoke up suddenly "Can I be done?"

Barbara stared at him in surprise, before shooting a discreet glance out the window. They had a little time left, but she wasn't sure how Dorrie would react to such a blunt demand.

Looking over at Dorrie, also appearing surprised by the sudden request, she appeared to consider it for a moment before smiling at him "Oh of course, but before you go just one more thing," she flipped through her notebook "You've sustained injuries from an animal attack on your ankle, correct?"

This time when she bit her lip Barbara tasted blood, how on earth did they know about *that!?*

Jim raised an eyebrow, looking more confused than anything else "....yeah?"

"Do you mind showing us?"

He froze "What now?"

"If you don't want to that's perfectly alright, you don't have to,"

Anger rippled up, eclipsing every ounce of anxiety. Damn right he didn't have to, warrant or no warrant, this woman had just crossed a line. Barbara was half a second away from telling Dorrie just how outrageous her request was and that there was no way she was examining her son, when Jim cut in.

"No! No--" Jim stopped himself and took in a deep breath "It's fine,"

Before she could stop him Jim propped up his foot on a stool and rolled up a pant leg, exposing faint pink lines an inch above the ankle joint "There, see? No big deal,"

Dorrie stepped closer, leaning in to glance at the scars. Lunau hung back, but kept his eyes locked on Jim and Dorrie. She spent the longest ten seconds of Barbara's life staring at her son's ankle before looking up "Thank you Jim, that will be all,"

He gave a curt nod, before jerking his pant leg back over his ankle and putting his foot down "I'll be in my room,"

With that he turned and headed upstairs. Barbara hoped that his rush to escape the room was only obvious to her.

Dorrie and Lunau watched him retreat up the stairs, once he was gone their focus shifted onto towards Barbara.

“Now Dr. Lake we’re just about done here there’s a few more things I want to ask you,”

Barbara nodded along, even as her heart soared at the words ‘just about done’ “Alright then, do you mind if we sit at the table?”

“Not at all,”

Forcing herself to maintain a neutral expression, she was in the homestretch just had to make it to the end, Barbara stepped over and took a seat at the table; Dorrie and Lunau right behind her.

She was going to make it, just a few more questions and these people would be out of her house.

She was going to be ok. *Jim* was going to be ok.

Settling into the wooden chair, Lunau standing behind her, Dorrie held up her notebook and pen “Can you describe your and Jim’s relationship with your extended family?”

The second those words fell from her lips whatever relief Barbara had started feeling vanished. Her stomach curdled, acid rising in the back

of her throat.

Not a completely unexpected question, they wanted to get some background on the situation and see if there was a history of abuse. But that still didn't mean it was going to be easy for her to answer.

"Of-- of course," Barbara took in several gusty breaths to steady herself, and then spoke.

"I'm not in contact with any of my living relatives and I haven't been for sixteen years, Jim has never met or spoken with any of them,"

That statement caused both Dorrie and Lunau to perk up instantly.

"Why is that?" Dorrie asked, pen poised and ready.

Somehow Barbara's throat got even tighter "My maternal grandmother, my last grandparent, passed away when Jim was two, my only aunt and uncle are my mother's sister and her husband, they were never interested in a relationship with me so I never pursued one. I have no siblings,"

"And your parents?"

Her face burned, chest tight, all the emotion from this afternoon threatening to bubble out and explode, along with decades old wounds ready to tear open and bleed fresh.

"I made the choice to cut them out of my life when I was twenty

three," Barbara said at last, unable to maintain eye contact as she did.

When Dorrie spoke up again her voice was softer than she expected "And why did you decide to do that?"

It was a long time before Barbara answered, summoning the words back from a part of her life she had long tried to move past.

"Both of my parents were emotionally abusive to me for my entire childhood,"

"Do you mind giving me a specific example?"

Actually she'd prefer to get an appendectomy without anesthesia "They….they were constantly critical of me," not good enough, some people wouldn't even call that abusive "They used guilt to manipulate me all the time, growing up I was always trying to appease them and keep them happy,"

Her voice nearly cracked towards the end. It was true, all of it, but there was more, so much more. How much were these people going to drag out of her before they were satisfied?

In a move that surprised her, Dorrie extended a hand across the table, not touching, but close "I'd like to know the steps you took to go no contact with them, but please take all the time you need Dr. Lake,"

Barbara nodded her acknowledgement while gripping the armrests of her chair, knuckles white She was standing on the edge of a cliff, pushed there inch by inch by everything that had happened to her since she walked in the door. She needed to calm down, get it

together, shut this chapter of her life back up and plow forward.

“When I realized that they were never going to change I decided that I didn’t want them in my life anymore, I left home at seventeen to live with my grandmother, but for a while we still spoke on the phone and saw each other at family gatherings. But when Jim was born I knew I never wanted him exposed to any of that toxicity and cut them off completely. To this day my parents don’t have our contact information or even know what city we live in,”

She risked a glance across the table.

Lunau, whether because he was unbothered or had an excellent poker face, hadn’t responded at all to Barbara’s story, for her part Dorrie’s expression was somber, but also sympathetic “I can see why you would make that decision, what about his father’s family?”

Now that question was a lot easier, even if knowing what question was sure to come after it made the burning in her gut return with a vengeance “We’re not in contact with them either, James’ grandparents were never involved in his life, neither were his aunts and uncles. His parents live in South Carolina, we never visited but we did speak over the phone back when we-- James and I, were together, but once we….separated that contact ceased, James has a half brother, but he lives in Georgia and I’ve never had contact with him,”

“And James, your ex-husband,” Dorrie said gently “How did your relationship with him end?”

Even though she’d seen that question coming from a mile away, hearing it out loud, Barbara knew she must look physically ill.

With her parents she hadn’t asked to be born or chosen to grow up

with them, but James….

James was a mess she'd gotten into all on her own.

All of a sudden Barbara couldn't do this anymore, she was fighting with everything she had to stay composed, but all she wanted to do was scream, tear off her skin and let the raging storm inside her explode "I…I…I'm sorry can we just take a break for a minute?"

Lunau frowned "Actually--"

"Actually," Dorrie cut in "I think we're at a good spot to stop for today,"

Shock and relief rushed through her like twin lightning bolts, hot and cold all at once "Really?"

"Yes," Dorrie said, getting to her feet "It sounds like that's a complicated subject, and it's getting late, so how about we meet up another day so you can tell me everything in more detail?"

So it didn't look like she was completely out of the woods, but still Barbara would take what she could get "Of course, that would be just fine,"

"Excellent," Dorrie tore a page out of her notebook and slid it and her pen towards Barbara "If you can just give me your contact info I'll send you some dates and times and you can let me know what works best for you,"

Beyond grateful that today's visit was almost at an end, Barbra hastily scratched down her phone number and email address before sliding it back to Dorrie, who gently folded it and tucked it into her pocket.

"Just one last question before we go, is there anything in particular that you find yourself struggling with as a single parent?"

By this point Barbara was so burnt out that she was barely able to put together a cohesive answer "I…I'm sure there is, but nothing comes to mind right now,"

Dorrie beamed at her, and as much as she was grateful for her patience this woman's overly cheery attitude was uncanny "Struggling is nothing to be ashamed of, taking care of a family is hard work,"

She held out a pamphlet towards Barbara "Here are some general resources if you ever feel like things are getting to be too much,"

Barbara barely had time to take the pamphlet before Dorrie was flashing a business card in her direction to "And here's my card with my contact information. If you ever have any problems or get into a jam, or even if you just want to talk, don't hesitate to call me,"

"Thank you," Barbara said as she took the card, guilt managing to wriggle it's way in past every other emotion.

These people hadn't come here with the intention of destroying their lives, they just wanted to help. But the fact of the matter was they couldn't, not unless Dorrie had a magic wand tucked next to her pen.

The cold hard truth was that one else could be trusted with Jim's

secret, and by extension, taking care of him.

Dorrie glanced over at Lunau, that seemed to be some kind of queue as they both got to their feet “Alright I think we’re done here,”

Even though she was counting the seconds until they were gone, Barbara forced herself to go through the motions “Are you sure? Is there anything else you need to see?”

Once again Dorrie flashed Barbara her unflappable smile “No need, we were able to take a look at everything we needed to. Take care,”

Barbara gave a halfhearted wave as they walked away “Thanks, have a good rest of your night,”

“You to,” with that Dorrie and Lunau stepped out the front door, shutting it behind them. Barbara sat in silence for a few seconds, then thirty, only when a whole minute had passed did Barbara allow herself to go limp and collapse against the table, awashed with equal parts overwhelming relief and overpowering dread.

It was a massive load off her back to have the investigators out of the house, why had they been here in the first place? Who had called? What exactly had they seen?

Dorrie and Lunau. What were they talking about right now? The curfew? The smell? The bed? The scars? Her?

Barbara pushed against the table and forced herself up straight.

She couldn't let herself fall into a spiral of paranoia, the bottom line was if one person saw something concerning, another could as well. And regardless of what Dorrie and Lunau had seen, that bell had been well and truly rung. The only thing they could do was watch themselves on all sides and make sure that no one in their lives had reason to be suspicious.

And it was just one visit, it wasn't like they were already looking up foster homes. If she and Jim cooperated and played along this was sure to fizzle out in a month or two.

But then why couldn't she stop trembling?

Barbara dragged herself to her feet, heading into the kitchen to make some tea to hopefully settle her nerves, fighting and losing the battle against working herself into a panic.

And she couldn't stop thinking about what could have possibly been concerning enough to get a warrant signed?

She paused mid step and glanced around the room. Admittedly the visit with Dorrie and Lunau could have gone better, but it wasn't like they'd seen anything outright damning. If they made a point to clean up Jim's room and for Barbara to pick up a few more chores they should be in the clear. And the scars….

Well every animal bit had to look a little different.

So why did she feel almost sick with dread, why couldn't she shake the feeling that something deeply private had been exposed?

All they'd done was talk a little bit and look around the house, granted Barbara hadn't exactly been thrilled to walk in on strangers talking to Jim and--

Her heart stopped.

Dorrie and Lunau had a warrant, and they'd already been here when she got home, who's to say they hadn't already been here when Jim got home to? What if they'd gotten here way ahead of both of them and done some poking around on their own?

And there was one area of the house they hadn't touched while Barbara was here.

Chill spreading out from her chest to the rest of her body, Barbara slowly walked over to the door that Dorrie and Lunau had ignored in her presence; desperately hoping to be mistaken. Maybe it wasn't that noticeable. Maybe it could probably easily be mistaken for something else.

She pulled it open, blowing every last one of those possibilities out of the water.

The claw marks were still there, fresh as if they'd been made that afternoon. A neon sign would be less obvious.

Barbara shut the door, feeling disconnected from the action, like her body didn't belong to her anymore. But she could still see the claw marks flashing in the front of her brain. They needed to get those fixed, *yesterday* . But wait, if they'd already been noticed wouldn't covering them up be more--

Then she caught a glimpse of something worse.

The exercise band, hanging just inches away; deliberately hung and placed in such a way that it could only have one clear purpose.

How many times had she pulled it shut over the basement doorknob? How many times had she listened to her child screaming from behind that same door?

Just because she couldn't trust anyone else to take care of Jim didn't mean she deserved him.

A child wouldn't get taken away for a slightly smelly room or messy bed, but this….

This would do it.

Suddenly keeping herself under control was the furthest thing from her mind.

Barbara ripped the band off its hook.

Get rid of it get rid of it now.

Couldn't throw it away, someone might see it in the trash, she needed to destroy it, she needed to--

Barbara ran over to the junk drawer, yanking it open and tearing

through its contents, grabbing the first thing that could do the job. A box cutter.

Whipping the blade out, she slashed and hacked at the rubber cords without hesitation.

Strangers in their house.

Tiny chunks of yellow rubber flew to the floor.

Jim being taken away from her.

She didn't slow down her frenzied assault on the band. Not even when the blade missed her fingers by millimeters. If anything she sped up, all the emotion from the past hour she'd tried to suppress boiling up to the surface.

Her baby, far away and surrounded by other people.

She couldn't cut fast enough, tearing and cutting and shredding with everything she had.

Someone else seeing his other face.

Her hands were shaking as she kept slashing at the blade, unable to pull in enough breath as the world collapsed around her.

Strangers, hurting, or even killing Jim because of it .

All of a sudden she had nothing left to cut at. Panting with exhaustion as the band lay in pieces on the floor all around her, just the empty handle in one hand and the box cutter in the other.

It was only now that she registered the feeling of tears running down her face.

“Mom?”

Barbara jerked her head in the direction of the sound. Jim, he had already changed for the night and come downstairs without her noticing, she’d forgotten how stealthy his blue form could be despite his size.

Walking in on his mother tearing apart an exercise band like a madwoman.

Her eyes stung. How could she? How could she let herself break down like this? No matter how stressed she was about the CPS visit, her *child* must be even more--

Jim hurried over to her and got down on his knees; starting to pick the bits of yellow rubber up off the floor “What’s going on mom? Why were you--”

Acting completely on impulse she hugged him, kneeling down just far enough so that the top of Jim’s head went up to her chin.

“It’s going to be ok sweetie,” she squeezed his shoulders “No--”

No one's going to take you away.

"N-- nuh-- nothing's going to happen from just one visit,"

Don't say those words, don't put that idea in his head. Barbara was the parent, right now her feelings weren't what mattered. She needed to pull herself together so she could be there for Jim.

"We-- we just need to cooperate and go along with them for now, everything's going to be ok, I promise,"

For a moment Jim didn't move, frozen and stiff in her embrace. Then he softened, leaning into the hug.

Barbara squeezed him tighter "We're going to get through this together,"

Jim slowly reached up and returned the hug "Right, we take care of each other,"

In spite of everything that drew a fragile smile out of Barbara, even as fresh tears threatened to spill "Right,"

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed my longest chapter to date, shout out to violetwitch820 and featherdancer for shooting me some resources

while I was researching how CPS investigations work. One thing I found particularly interesting is that CPS needs the parent's permission to enter the home and speak to the children, and has to leave when the parent asks them to. Unless they have a warrant, then they don't need permission to do either of those things.

And for those of you wondering Dorrie and Charles did show up at the house well before Jim got home to, and the first thing they did was go the the basement and thoroughly document and photograph the claw marks and exercise band.

Next time: Mostly the same events, but with a different perspective.

Claire

Chapter Notes

> Made some minor edits in the last chapter due to polishing the timeline of Barbara's backstory. Just changed some of the numbers about when she cut contact with her parents and how long it's been.
>
> So no one has to go back and reread, Barbara went no contact with her parents when she was 23 and it has been that way for 16 years.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Claire’s teeth dug sharply into her lip. The three of them had gotten into their share of mischief over the years, ranging from harmless fun to being grounded for an entire month. But this was by far the worst thing they’d ever done.

She risked a peek out of the top of the bush, forcing herself to ignore the pointy branches digging into her skin. So far both the house and the street were quiet, but Claire didn’t want to risk getting closer when they still weren’t sure where Dr. Lake was.

“Anything yet?” Darci whispered.

“Not yet,” Claire said softly “But Dr. Lake is due back any minute so let’s stay put.

The leaves gave a slight rustle as Claire sank back down, nestling back in next to Mary and Darci.

To be fair this wasn’t Claire’s idea, the whole thing had been Mary’s plan from the start. After Darci had told them what she’d overheard

her dad say on the phone, Mary had brought up the idea of doubling back after school and sneaking over to Jim's house to watch things go down.

Sneak in and out with no one ever seeing them. Easy peasy...provided one of the many many many ways this plan could go horribly wrong didn't happen.

So yeah, Claire had a bad feeling about this right from the start, but ended up letting Darci and Mary talk her into it anyway. In spite of the nagging little voice in the back of her head that kept saying this was going to blow up in their faces.

And when they got there and saw Jim's bike outside and an unfamiliar car parked on the curb and their reaction had been to cut across someone's backyard and duck into the bushes alongside Jim's house; it more or less confirmed that this was going to end badly.

"What do you think's happening?" Darci whispered again.

"I don't know, maybe--"

"Guys shut up!"

Claire whipped her head around, branch slapping against her cheek, ready to jump down Mary's throat for snapping at them, only for her heart to shoot up into her throat. Dr. Lake's car, with Dr. Lake behind the wheel, ambling into the cul de sac and pulling up into the driveway. The three of them stayed as still as possible, silently watching as she stepped out of the car and walked up to the house.

About five seconds after the door shut behind her Claire spoke up.

“We gotta see what’s going on in there,”

“Definitely,”

“Agreed,”

Darci pushed herself up onto her knees, as the tallest scouting was her responsibility “Over there,” she pointed to some hedges just outside the living room window.

Staying low to the ground, Claire began crawling towards their new vantage point, Mary and Darci right behind her. They were making good progress, right up until Claire bumped into an obstacle.

Oh *fudgeknucles* what now?

She stopped in her tracks, perched on her hands and knees, trying to prod whatever it was out of the way with her elbow.

Behind her Mary squirmed impatiently “Claire what’s the holdup?”

“I don’t know,” she continued to try and dislodge the unknown object “Something’s blocking me,”

Too soft to be a rock, but too firm to be a plant, so what was--

Suddenly the ‘object’ let out a grunt and flopped over on its side.

The three of them let out a chorus of startled gasps.

“ *Toby!?* ” Claire squeaked “What are you--”

“Either keep quiet or get your own hiding spot!”

She shut her mouth, more stunned than anything else.

Toby looked at them through narrowed eyes, they stared back just as warily. After a few seconds of tense silence he scooted over to the side, creating a space large enough for the three of them to shuffle into place under the window.

Pulse still pounding in her ears, Claire slowly raised her gaze and peeked through the glass. Jim and Dr. Lake were inside sitting on the couch, across from them was an unfamiliar woman dressed in slacks and a blouse. It looked like they were all just talking right now, with the mystery woman occasionally taking notes, but Jim and Dr. Lake both looked *incredibly* tense.

Seeing how there wasn’t too much action going on right now, Claire’s eyes flickered over from the window to her side “Toby,” she whispered from the corner of her mouth “What are you doing here?”

“ *What am I doing here? What are you doing here!?* ”

“Practicing our underwater basket weaving,” Mary leaned across Claire to hiss at him “What does it look like we’re doing!?”

“It *looks* like you’re spying on Jim and Dr. Lake!”

“I could say the same about you!”

“Why are you even--”

“Guys *quiet!* ” Darci hushed them as loud as she could without blowing their cover “Something’s happening,”

Four sets of eyes swiveled back up to the window. Someone new had entered the room, an older man in khakis and a button up shirt. He was holding up a large t-shirt, based on the way he was glancing back and forth between the shirt and Jim and Dr. Lake it looked like he was asking them something about it.

“That’s Chuck,” Darci whispered “He’s my dad’s partner,”

Chuck kept speaking for a few more seconds, then the woman on the couch said something and stood up. In response Chuck put down the shirt and they all got to their feet, turned, and headed towards the stairs.

As soon as the last person disappeared upstairs Claire let out a shaky breath. Looks like they were back to waiting.

“I’m here because I saw the car from across the street and came over

to investigate," Toby said in a low murmur, not even turning his head to speak "What I want to know is why you guys are here,"

Claire squirmed, her eyes were locked on the top of the stairs, but she could practically hear the suspicious frown etched into Toby's face "Sorry Toby but right now we *really* need to focus on this, I promise we'll explain everything later,"

She couldn't see what his face looked like after hearing that, but after letting out a sigh he sat back and didn't say anything else.

None of them said anything for a long time, all intensely focused on the window, waiting for something to happen. What Claire didn't know.

If anything the dead quiet coming from the house made everything worse. At least with shouting and screaming they would know what was going on, but silence...that could mean a lot of things.

They all felt the tension, the only noises coming from them the occasional rattle of leaves and sticks when someone shifted around in the bush to try and avoid the worst of the poking branches. Waiting and waiting as their nerves wound tighter and tighter.

Finally, after the longest twenty minutes of Claire's life, everyone in the house came back down the stairs. The four of them letting out small, simultaneous sighs of relief.

Meanwhile everyone inside went into the kitchen, mystery woman opening drawers and cabinets still talking to Jim and Dr. Lake. At first everything looked normal, then Claire started to notice. The little flinches Jim made whenever mystery woman spoke to him. How Dr. Lake seemed to wince every time she answered a question.

Things were definitely heating up.

Then from out of nowhere Jim put his foot up on a chair and rolled up his pant leg, talking and gesturing towards his ankle. Both mystery woman and Chuck were looking at his leg intently.

Ok this was weird, Claire could understand CPS talking and going through people's stuff, even checking the kids out if they were super bruised and beat up or something. But why the hell were they looking at Jim's--

A lightbulb flicked on in her brain.

Last November. Jim had come back from a camping trip with a bandage around his ankle.

He told them it was from a fox bite.

Before her brain could fully process what this could mean, Jim put his foot down just as abruptly as he'd lifted it, turned, and headed up the stairs. Everyone one in the room watched him go but no one tried to stop him.

After Jim left Dr. Lake and mystery woman sat down at the table and kept talking. For a little while things looked more or less normal. But at this point Claire knew better. She kept her eyes on Dr. Lake, watching as the conversion went on. Watching as the corners of her mouth twisted more and more until it looked like she'd been chewing on a lemon. How her eyes crinkled at the edges, forcing her to blink more than usual.

It looked like Dr. Lake was about to cry.

Heat filled Claire's cheeks even as she kept up her surveillance. Despite everything else that was going on it still felt weird to spy on someone who looked like they were about to burst into tears.

But why was she so upset? Claire could understand better if Dr. Lake got mad or defensive after talking to the CPS workers who were accusing her of being a bad mom, but why was she--

Suddenly mystery woman stood and tore a piece of paper out of her notebook, sliding it towards Dr. Lake. Who scribbled something on it before sliding it back. Mystery woman handed some more papers to her as they both spoke a little more, then she and Chuck headed towards the door.

"Follow them," Darci spoke up in a voice that was barely audible "We need to hear what they're talking about,"

Moving as fast as they could without making noise, the four of them hastily crawled through the bushes until they were right next to the car in the driveway, watching the two adults steadily approach.

Chuck spoke up first "So, what did you think?"

Claire held her breath.

"It's too soon to say anything for sure," mystery woman quickly tucked her notebook into her purse before getting out the car keys

“But she definitely seems controlling, and I do not like how often their stories contradicted each other,”

Her legs were starting to cramp and her hands were scratched raw from branches and thorns, but Claire couldn’t care less. Her entire world had narrowed down to the two voices less than six feet away, leaning forward as much as she could without breaching the bush.

“I can’t imagine how much harder this would have been if we didn’t have the warrant,” Chuck added, slipping his hands into his pockets “Thank god that teacher added another report on top of Louis’s,”

Darci gasped. In a flash Mary clapped a hand over her mouth, snapping her head over and piercing the adults with a hawk-like gaze.

Fortunately the sound went unnoticed and they continued on to the car without missing a beat.

But what did he mean about a second report?

Darci’s dad had made a report after they’d talked to him, so where did a second one come from?

Chuck shook his head, stepping around and getting into the passenger’s seat “And did you see those scars? Animal bite my ass,”

A jagged lump of ice dropped in Claire’s ribcage.

No. Dr. Lake couldn't have.

Jim might have been dodgy about the whole basement thing but there was no way he wouldn't tell them if his mom was--

"I couldn't agree more," mystery woman put the key in and started the engine "Those marks were made with a scalpel, no buts about it,"

For a moment she forgot how to breath, lungs frozen, the chill spreading out from her chest across her whole body.

The sounds of the car pulling out and driving away seemed a million miles away.

Scalpel marks. Not animal bites.

Her stomach was rolling. She'd never believed people could puke from bad news alone until this moment.

Before today Claire thought that the worst thing happening to Jim was being locked in the basement but now--

Now she didn't know what to think.

A gentle tug on the elbow brought her back to reality "My house, quick," Toby hissed.

Following Toby's lead, the four of them scurried around the cul de sac,

taking the long way and keeping to the bushes to avoid being spotted. At the end they had to dart back out into plain sight while Toby fumbled with his door lock. Claire noticed Mary kept glancing behind them towards Jim's house as he did. Finally Toby was able to get the door open, all of them rushing in. He shut the door behind him, letting out a whoosh of air as he sagged against it in relief. Claire, Mary, and Darci all letting out similar sighs.

At last. Safe.

"Toby pie?"

They all jumped like they'd stepped on live wires.

"Is that you?" his Nana's voice continued to call out from the kitchen "Are your friends with you?"

Toby was perched against the door, fingers stiffened into claws and spine ramrod straight "Yeah, uh…. we all came over to work on our...history project," he started gesturing wildly toward the stairs "Just need to all go upstairs where we can...talk, about our project,"

Claire could take a hint. She turned and jogged up the stairs, Darci and Mary hot on her heels.

"Do you kids want any refreshments?" Nana asked again.

"No thanks Mrs. D," Mary shouted back as they booked it out of there.

“Well let me know if you change your minds dearies,”

They all hurried into Toby’s bedroom, where hopefully they could talk in private, Toby tailing them in and then gently shutting the door behind him.

For a moment they all just stood in silence, too wired and frazzled to even try for conversation.

It didn’t last long.

“ *What the actual fuck was all that!?* ” Mary shrieked.

Claire slumped against the wall, hands shaking “I think…I think there’s more going on than we first thought,”

“What I want to know is who filed that other report,” Darci gripped her elbows, hugging herself “He said it was a teacher, but which teacher was it and why did they do it?”

“It was Mr. Strickler,”

They all slowly turned towards Toby.

Toby met their gazes without flinching, his expression pinched and tense, but Claire could see traces of steel underneath it “And he did it because I told him,”

He plunked down on his bed, head drooping, the words all coming out in a rush “I know it was an extreme step-- and I totally took the nuclear option-- and this is going to screw a lot of things up for Jim and Dr. Lake, but I couldn’t stand by and do nothing!”

Claire glanced over at Mary and Darci, the three of them sharing an uneasy look.

“What?” Toby glanced back and forth between them

“Toby….” Darci gently sat down next to him “We called CPS….also,”

He blinked “You what?”

“We went and talked to my dad about Jim...it’s like you said, we couldn’t just stand by and do nothing, not with what was going on,”

Toby’s eyes got huge “The second report…”

“And it’s a damn good thing we did,” Mary screeched, startling the rest of them “Did you hear them-- Jim’s mom went nuts on him with a scalpel!”

Both Claire and Toby flinched while Darci’s face curdled into a deep wince, like they seriously needed reminded of that part.

But now they knew. This went way beyond locked doors and curfews.

Jim's mom was *hurting* him.

Claire stepped over and put a hand on Mary's shoulder, partly to calm Mary down and partly to steady herself "That's why we gotta keep our cool and focus. There could still be a lot more stuff we don't know about going on, so we need to be ready for--"

"There is more," Toby's voice was deathly quiet "A lot more, I don't know everything but I know a lot,"

Everyone in the room went still.

"....what do you mean?" Darci said, voice barely above a whisper.

When he look up at them Toby's expression was dark "Back when we were in Elementary school his mom fell asleep at the wheel while we were in the back seat, a semi truck nearly hit us,"

Mary's mouth fell open, stunned into silence. Darci folded her arms against her stomach, face green. Claire didn't react, she couldn't even if she wanted to, pushed by everything that had happened to a place beyond shock.

"Jim does almost all of the chores at their house," Toby kept going, voice a monotone "Has since he was in Elementary school. Back then Dr. Lake would never let anyone babysit him, not even Nana. When we were in fourth grade she said she got him a babysitter for work nights but I think she was leaving him home alone,"

Darci's jaw worked up and down, struggling for words she couldn't manage to find. Next to her Claire could see the blood draining from

Mary's face leaving her the color of wax.

And it wasn't like she was much better, Claire could hear her heartbeat booming in her ears, skull light and head swimming. She was about half a second away from passing out.

"Every Halloween since I've known him his mom never let him trick or treat, not once. When we were in the mole scouts he got kicked out for missing too many meetings, he said it was because he got sick but it happened way too often for that to be true,"

His voice dropped even lower "They go on camping trips all the time, always to the middle of nowhere, and always just the two of them,"

The next part was so quiet Claire almost didn't hear it, almost.

"They never take pictures of their trips. And once when we were in middle school Jim came back with his entire back covered in bruises, and the last time he came back with cuts on his ankle,"

Claire was shaking all over, her grip on Mary's shoulder not enough to anchor her any more. She pried her fingers off one by one, moving slowly and deliberately to avoid falling down, and took a seat at the desk chair.

What else. What other horrible things were going on in Jim's house that they'd had no idea about?

All those months Claire had spent crushing on him how could she have been completely blind to...to...

She didn't know how much more Toby had to say, but if he kept going Claire was going to faint.

"Toby," Claire spoke up in a breathless voice "Stop, please,"

He complied, netting his fingers together and hanging his head.

Silence weighed over them like a lead blanket, heavy and suffocating.

"Oh my god," Darci practically whimpered "What do we even do?"

If the deafening quiet that followed her question was anything to go by, none of them knew the answer to that question.

All of a sudden the loud ringing of a phone went off, causing all of them to jump. Toby pulled out his offending device, motions jittery, only for his eyes to bug out once he spotted the screen "It's Jim!"

Claire's heart shot up into her throat for the second time today. Jim was calling, why? Had he figured out what they'd done?

Toby fumbled with his phone before setting it on his desk "I'm going to put it on speaker," he glanced from side to side at them " *No one* say anything,"

Both Claire and Darci nodded, Mary making the zipping motion over her own lips while scurrying up even closer. No doubt wanting to hear

every detail even without being able to contribute to the conversation.

With a slight but unmistakable quiver to his fingers, Toby tapped his phone screen twice “Hey Jimbo,” his cheerful tone a direct contrast to the anxious look on his face “How’s it hanging?”

“Toby…” Jim’s voice echoed out of the device “Can you just….talk about something?”

“Talk about what?”

“I don’t know, I just--” his voice cracked and Claire could practically see him hunched over, holding himself in a desperate attempt to keep from breaking down “I...I just had the worst thing happen and I really want to just listen to your voice right now,”

“Oh….ok,” Toby reached over and picked up a rock sitting on the corner of the desk “I just got a new bismuth from Nana for my rock collection,”

“Uh huh,”

Taking that ‘Uh huh’ as a sign of approval, Toby kept going “She bought it from one of her friends in her bingo club. She doesn’t remember where her friend got it, but because it’s in crystal form it must have been made by someone. Bismuth crystals are grown a lot in labs, but if you know what you’re doing you can also grow it in your own kitchen....”

Half tuning out Toby’s rant, Claire kept her eyes locked on the phone, waiting for Jim’s voice to emerge from it again. Without even

meaning to, she found herself leaning over slightly towards the silent device, Darci and Mary mirroring her actions. Quick, occasional glances at her watch told Claire that Toby's bismuth ramble had been going for a little over ten minutes.

"...so it turns out bismuth does decay into thallium, but it's half life is like twenty billion years, so I can see why they missed that," Toby paused, the phone emanating nothing but silence "You still there Jimbo?"

"Yeah," Jim's voice rang out, causing everyone to instantly perk up "I'm here,"

"Are you...are you doing better now?"

"I…" Jim let out a gusty sigh, deeper than Claire thought him capable of "Yes, I'm doing better,"

Toby bit his lip, weighing over something in his mind "So...what happened? Anything I can help out with?"

The phone sat silently on the desk.

"Jim," a tremor had entered Toby's voice, uncertainty etching deep lines into his face "Did you hear me?"

Claire was bent so far towards the phone so much she was practically hanging out of her seat, Darci right there with her, and Mary standing hunched over with her face just inches away from the screen.

“Toby,” Jim’s voice was surprisingly hard, causing them all to jolt back “I need to ask you something and I need you to be *completely* honest with me,”

Oh.

Oh no.

The panicky look on Toby’s face matched Darci and Mary’s; and undoubtedly Claire’s to.

“Sure,” Toby’s expression was strained with the effort of keeping his voice light “What is it?”

“Toby, do you--” Jim’s voice cracked. “Did you…”

He trailed off, the phone staying silent for so long Claire wondered if he’d hung up.

Toby wrung his hands together “Yeah Jim? You still there?”

“Toby do you...do you…. do you want to have lunch at the diner tomorrow?”

“Oh,” Toby deflated, along with the rest of them.

That was surprisingly anticlimactic. Although Claire was about ninety nine percent sure that wasn’t what Jim had originally planned on

asking.

“Ok sure, sounds great, I’ll run it by the girls,” his eyes flickered towards them “But I think that they’ll be down for that,”

Jim let out a husky sigh,

And they certainly had a lot bigger things to worry about right now, but did everyone’s voice sound this much deeper over the phone? Jim had practically gone from a tenor to a bass.

“Thanks Tobes, I’ll see you tomorrow,”

“Awesome, see you then, bye Jimbo,”

“Bye Toby,”

Toby tapped his phone again, shutting off Jim’s voice and filling the room with silence once again.

Finally Claire couldn’t stand it any longer “Ok, this is really bad, like a lot worse than any of us were thinking, but it sounds like Jim doesn’t know that we were the ones who told on him. And we need to keep it that way,”

“But Claire…” Darci said hesitantly “I really think we need to be honest about this. You remember how bad Jim freaked out when we tried to talk to the first time he. I really think it would be better if we told him that we called CPS ourselves right away. If he finds out later

from other people…”

“You…you’re not wrong, and we should tell him eventually, but….” Claire let out a breath, bracing herself “But you heard what your dad said, we have to stay in contact with Jim in case the investigation doesn’t come up with anything, and I don’t want to risk Jim giving us all the glacial shoulder again,”

Her voice nearly broke as she forced the next words out “Especially if his mom….hurts him again,”

“Claire’s right,” Toby stood up “And there could still be even more stuff I don’t know about, we can’t risk Jim cutting us off again,”

By now Mary was so pale she practically looked anemic, but she still managed to find her voice “Yeah, we have to be there for him in case his mom does something….even worse,”

Claire couldn’t help but shudder a little at that.

Darci swallowed hard “You’re right, our first priority is staying in the loop with him. So we play dumb and don’t let Jim know we made the call, for now,”

All of them nodded along with her words in silent agreement

Claire didn’t feel great about keeping secrets like this, especially since it was four on one. But Jim freezing them out the way he did had been *scary*. Bottom line they couldn’t risk that happening again, even if that meant they had to lie to him.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone wondering the reason Jim came back with bruises after one camping trip was because he got a little too ambitious with climbing in his troll form.

And it might seem like Jim is in denial about his friends being the ones to call CPS, but he knows, Jim knows with absolute certainty that it was one of them who made the call. The reason he's not addressing it is because of just how much of a lifeline his friend group is. Jim has spent a great deal of his life in enforced physical and social isolation, causing him to treasure every second he spends outside the house and every moment with his friends. He would rather go on pretending like everything's fine than risk imploding one of the few sources of joy in his life.

However this is only going to last for so long. The ongoing CPS investigation is going to be a constant source of stress for Jim. Slowly eroding any sense of security he has, and he's going to keep going back to the knowledge that it was one of his friends that brought this threat to his door. And sooner or later the dam is going to burst and Jim is going to lash out and demand an explanation.

Now here's the real kicker. Jim knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that one of his four friends called CPS on his mom. But the idea that not just one, but all of them making the call hasn't even crossed his mind.

Walter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the years Strickler had lost track of how many times another changeling had made a joke about how it must rankle him to teach history that he knew was false from firsthand experience.

But what most other changelings didn't realize was that between ineffective funding and highly biased textbooks he'd be teaching falsehoods one way or another.

The truly ironic thing about being a changeling educator was being forced to leave out key events responsible for shaping the modern world as they knew it that no human was aware even occurred.

"Can anyone tell me who the final king of Camelot was?"

The predictable grouping of hands went up; Claire Nuñez, Seamus Johnson, Darci Scott, Eli Pepperjack. He had no doubt that they all knew the correct answer, maybe it was time to check that one of his less alert students was still mentally present in some capacity.

"Ms. Longhannon?"

The girl in question jerked her gaze away from the window "Wha?"

A chorus of snickers came up from around her. Shannon flushed.

“We were discussing the final ruler of Camelot, Ms. Longhannon,”

“Oh….that was King Arthur…..right?”

He smiled “Correct,”

Pressing a button on the remote in his palm, Strickler switched the view on the projector to a timeline extending from the years 400 to 1200 “The Pendragon Empire, founded by Uther Pendragon in the fifth century, lasted until the early twelfth century, ending during the upheaval surrounding the death of his descendent, Arthur Pendragon. A large part of the chaos after Arthur’s death was due to the fact that Arthur left no immediate heirs apparent. That combined with crumbling infrastructure and opportunistic invasions from neighboring nations is what led to the fracturing of the empire,”

Strickler paused as the soft scratching of pencils on paper filled the room.

Neighboring nations, what drivel, it was enough to make any self respecting changeling want to laugh and vomit at the same time.

Granted, Strickler himself hadn’t been present for Camelot’s true downfall. He’d been a young changeling back then, trying to sell a remote clan of Slavic trolls on the benefits of an alliance with the Gumm Gumms.

He hadn’t succeeded. But in the end it turned out rather moot.

No, that was putting it far too mildly. It had taken over a century for the Janus Order to recover from the chaos; setting their goals back by

nearly a millennium.

Arthur might have lost the battle against his kingdom falling, but the victory he'd gained in the war was *exponentially* greater.

He'd prevented the extinction of the entire human race.

Strickler shut his eyes and pulled in a deep breath to ground himself back in the present as the last few students finished taking their notes.

No.

Not prevented. Delayed.

"Your final project will be done in groups, each group will be assigned a single century during the Pendragon empire and will put together a presentation summarizing the events and the impact of your assigned century. This presentation should last twenty minutes and we will be doing them in class at the end of the month,"

The entire room broke out into groans.

Strickler chuckled good naturedly "Consider it a small price to pay for not having any work over spring break, now I want you all to break into your groups, three to five people each, and have one member select your century, and enough rubrics for all of you," he gestured towards the small slips of papers on his desk sitting next to a fat stack of rubrics "The rest of the hour will be in class work time, so I suggest you get started,"

There was a shuffle of desks and sneakers as the students settled into their groups, a handful darting up and snatching their centuries and rubrics under Strickler's keen eye. Had to make sure everyone settled into proper groups and keep track of who was working on what century after all. He waited until things had nearly settled down before speaking up again.

"Jim Lake,"

The boy in question started in his seat, both him and his groupmates turning and looking at Strickler inquisitively.

"Yeah?"

"Do you mind stepping outside with me for a moment?"

Based on his expression Jim certainly minded quite a bit, a gauntness present in his features that hadn't been there a month ago, but he stood from his chair all the same "Ok….sure,"

Strickler ignored the course of oohs that filled the room as Jim headed over to meet him at the door. Only after he had stepped out and closed the door behind them, the two alone in the hallway, did Strickler speak again.

"Jim, I've been monitoring your behavior these past few weeks, and quite frankly I'm concerned,"

Someone less observant and experienced at the art of subterfuge would have missed the subtle way Jim's shoulders stiffened, the flicker of panic on his face before it settled into a calm veneer.

But Strickler missed nothing.

Jim forced out an uncomfortable laugh “Well…uh, sorry to worry you, but I’m totally fine,”

Strickler had to bite back a sigh. It looked like Jim, not unexpectedly, had decided to be evasive; no matter. In that case the only thing to do was strike at the heart of the issue, bluntly and without delay.

He whipped a comb out of his front pocket; cheap and still sealed in its plastic packaging, but very fine toothed, holding it out in front of him “I want you to run this through your hair,”

Blinking, Jim stared at the comb and then back up at Strickler “….are you serious?”

“Humor me,”

Looking more confused than anything else, Jim slowly took the comb, pulled it from its wrapper, and ran it through his hair once before promptly handing it back “There, is that all? Because I need to--”

“Jim. Look at the comb.”

He did, all the color instantly draining from his face.

From end to end the comb’s teeth were stuffed to the brim with short,

black hairs.

“Your hair is falling out.” Strickler’s tone brooked no questioning. He wasn’t asking, he was stating a fact “So do not tell me that everything is fine. If everything were fine you wouldn’t be losing your hair from stress,”

Of course there were plenty of non-stress related medical conditions that could cause a fifteen year old boy to start losing his hair, but Strickler found that his intuition was rarely wrong.

Jim hadn’t so much as twitched, standing frozen in place, eyes wide and locked on the comb.

Strickler let out a sigh and tossed the comb into a nearby trash can “I’m going to be frank with you Jim, I know CPS is investigating your family,”

Now *that* got a reaction, Jim snapping his head up, breathing quick and shallow, voice tight with pure panic “You do!?”

“Keep your voice down, yes, the investigator called the school with a few questions,” Strickler saw no reason to bring up the fact that he had been the one to make the initial call, much less that he had done so at the behest of Mr. Domzalski.

“But I’m not going to ask about that. That case is a matter between your family and the state, now if you want to talk I am more than willing to listen, but I’m not going to pry into your family’s private matters,”

Just like that the wind went out of his sails. Jim practically going limp, swaying on his feet overcome with relief. But before he could relax too much, Strickler was talking again.

“That being said, in the weeks that the investigation has been going on, I have become seriously troubled by your behavior,”

“What…behavior…are you talking about?”

“You’re anxious and unfocused, I’ve caught you nodding off in class no fewer than three times in the past week. And this is pure speculation on my part, but I don’t think you’ve been getting nearly enough to eat, which could be contributing to your hair loss,”

Squirming under his scrutiny, Jim ran a shaky hand through his hair, before he quickly realized what he was doing and pulled it away “Ok things have been hard… and maybe I’ve missed a meal or two…but I’ve just…really been focusing on keeping my grades up,”

It was true. Strickler happened to know for a fact that Jim was pulling all A’s in every subject. But while that was a fact it certainly wasn’t the whole truth.

“You’re grades are exceptional, and normally I would applaud you for being so diligent with your studies, but I get the feeling you’ve been hyperfocusing on your schoolwork in order to avoid dealing with the other problems in your life,”

From the way Jim flinched at his words, breath catching in his throat, Strickler knew he’d struck the truth.

“Look…I…I know that there’s a lot going on, but I swear I can handle it,”

“Jim--”

“I promise it’s really not that bad,”

“Not that bad? For goodness sake Jim, your hair is falling out!”

The boy had no response to that, downcast eyes locked on the floor, unable to meet Strickler’s gaze.

Squaring his shoulders, Strickler clasped his hands together and netted his fingers in front of him. Bluntness had served its purpose in this conversation, now it was time for the olive branch “With everything going on in your life I imagine it must feel like you’re carrying the world on your shoulders,”

“Yeah,” Jim mumbled “Something like that,”

Strickler gave him a small smile “Have you heard of the greek myth of Atlas?

Jim looked up at that “No….should I have?”

“Atlas was a titan that took part in the war between the gods and titans, and when the titans lost Atlas was condemned to hold up the sky for all eternity,”

“Okay…but what does that have to do with...me?”

“In the myth Atlas alone bore the weight of the entire world on his shoulders, but Jim, you aren’t Atlas. However heavy your burden is, you don’t have to bear it alone. The faculty here can put you in touch with some excellent counselors and--”

“Actually I really don’t need anything like that,” Jim stepped around him and tried to go back into the classroom “And I should really be getting started on--”

“Jim.” Strickler allowed a trace of stone to creep into his voice “We are not done talking.”

The boy froze midstep, slowly turning back towards him with clear hesitation.

Once Jim was facing him again Strickler cleared his throat and started over “The purpose of counselors and therapists isn’t to scrutinize you or your family, but to give you tools and resources, coping mechanisms to help you better deal with the struggles life throws at you. And before you ask, no, you don’t have to talk about the investigation with them either,”

Jim’s mouth abruptly twisted into a scowl “If I don’t have to talk to them then why should I bother...even….”

He trailed off once he noticed Strickler’s expression, the boy couldn’t possibly see down to the depths of Strickler’s true thoughts, but he clearly saw something that gave him pause.

“...sorry,” Jim muttered, looking down and away.

Strickler just stared back at him evenly.

One didn’t survive as a high school teacher without developing a thick skin in regard to teenage impertinence. But this kind of snide back talk was far more in line coming from Steve, or even Seamus. Hearing it from Jim it was...troubling.

Not wasting any more time, Strickler pulled a sticky note out of his pocket and held it out “Here are a few of the counselors and therapists that I most recommend, but if you want more options let me know and I can get you a complete list,”

Jim didn’t move, arms not so much as twitching from their position at his sides. Staring at the note with a sour expression on his face.

“I’m not going to force you to go see any of them, but you will take their contact information and keep it,” One of Strickler’s eyebrows quirked up “Unless of course accepting the contact information of guidance counselors or therapists would put you at risk for some reason? If that is the case I certainly wouldn’t want to put you in any danger, but I would need to know exactly what kind of danger you would be in,”

Jim chewed on his lip, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

Strickler held his gaze, kept his hand extended, and waited.

Finally after what must have been a solid minute, Jim reluctantly reached up and took the note. Tucking it into his pocket under Strickler's close scrutiny "Can I go back in now?"

Strickler frowned. He was not pleased with how this had turned out. Despite his best efforts the boy seemed dead set on refusing every helping hand extended his way. But as the saying went, one could lead a horse to water, but can't make them drink. The only thing to do was continue to offer the water and hope one day he bent his head and accepted.

"You can, but please remember, as a teacher it's not just my job to educate you, myself and every other staff member in this building has an obligation to look after your wellbeing, so please don't forget that, young Atlas,"

Jim rolled his eyes "Yeah, sure,"

Strickler frowned; darker, harder this time, Jim shrinking under the force of his gaze. Brusqueness gone as quickly as it had come.

"I...I'm sorry…"

It wasn't as though Strickler was losing his patience with the boy, compared to his dealings with the order's underlings this was as relaxing as a day at the spa. Rather he was becoming increasingly concerned by Jim's uncharacteristic outbursts.

Despite Jim's best efforts to bury his troubles and pretend that they didn't exist, his woes were finding their way to the surface one way or another.

“More people care about you than you know Jim,”

Strickler was suddenly struck by inspiration. For whatever reason Jim wasn’t comfortable reaching out to Strickler, or any other adult it seemed. Perhaps the idea was to appeal to his peer relationships.

“Like your friends,”

He gestured towards the window in the classroom door, at cluster of five desks with four students at them in particular “You happen to be graced with a group of companions who would go to the ends of the earth to help you, not everyone can be so fortunate,”

Strickler turned his head slightly, trying to gauge Jim’s reaction. But to his shock, rather than looking relieved or even uncertain, something hard and inscrutable had settled over Jim’s face.

“Yeah, they would wouldn’t they,”

The boy’s tone cinched it. Strickler had accomplished all that he could for today, pushing Jim any further right now would do more harm than good.

With only a pang of reluctance, Strickler opened the door and allowed Jim back inside, following shortly after.

He went over to his desk to grade quizzes while the students worked for the rest of the hour, Jim taking his seat at the cluster of desks, rejoining his companions and enmeshing himself in their project.

Despite his best efforts to file this incident in the back of his mind, Strickler found himself dwelling on his brief interaction with Jim. Keeping a subtle eye on him and his group.

Strickler had been doing this for a very long time and found that for good or for ill, his intuition was rarely wrong.

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink, only keep offering and hope one day he bent his head and accepted it. And Strickler's intuition was telling him that Jim would break before he ever bent.

Chapter End Notes

The fun part about writing this post-Wizards is all the worldbuilding and foreshadowing I can sneak in. The way this story unfolds isn't going to quite line up with the backstory given to us in Wizards, but rest assured the twists I have planned should be pretty interesting.

I think Strickler might be one of my all time favorite perspectives to write. There's just so many layers to him, everything he says and does has a deeper meaning. Like when he remarks that the human extinction has only been delayed; is he reassuring himself that he won't have to keep up the fleshbag charade forever, or is he trying to stop himself from getting attached to his human students when he knows that they're living on borrowed time? Who can really say.

And he gives us some outsider perspective on how Jim is doing, and boy is he not ok. Not only is Jim walking on eggshells 24/7 trying to maintain the "Perfect Happy Functional" façade to keep CPS from digging too deeply; but the constant state of stress he's in is causing him to take a nosedive into self loathing of his troll form and denying himself the troll-food he needs at night. Leading to his malnutrition and hair loss. With all of this weighing on him, Jim's going to reach his breaking point sooner rather than later.

Next time: Jim reaches his breaking point. He discovers who called CPS on his family and lashes out HARD.

Jim

Chapter Notes

> As of this chapter I've changed the Archive warnings for this story to "Creator Chose Not to Use Archive Warnings"
>
> Content warning: Things get pretty intense in this chapter in a lot of ways. I can't be more detailed without spoilers, so I'll put more specific warnings in the bottom notes that will contain spoilers. And if anyone feels that I've left something important out of the warnings please let me know.
>
> This is your warning, here be dragons, proceed with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a stain in the carpet, from coffee if he had to guess. A dark brown spot glaringly obvious against the beige. It looked just big enough for his hand to cover.

“Jim, are you listening?”

He jerked his eyes up from the floor towards the desk in front of him.

“Sorry what was that?”

Her lips turned downwards into a tiny frown “We were discussing your goals Jim,”

“Oh, right….” he drummed his fingers against his knees.

A goal. Jim had still been trying to think of one when he zoned out looking at the carpet.

Couldn't do any kind of job or college, those weren't happening for him. She'd said their goals could be as long term or short term as they wanted, so maybe--

"My goal is to buy my own Vespa," Jim said, giving himself a mental pat on the back as he did.

Owning his own Vespa. Nice, realistic, normal. A good, solid goal that no one should look twice at.

The frown melted away into a wide smile "That's great, do you have anywhere you want to go in your Vespa?"

His face blanked, stomach dropping no less than two inches.

Stupid.

People wanted cars and Vespas and stuff because they wanted to go places in them. Unlike Jim who was never going to leave his hometown.

"Ummm…..not sure, all the places I normally go I guess," he forced his voice to stay even despite the squirming in his belly.

Her porcelain smile remained fixed in place "I think that sounds like an excellent goal, but how about you try to think of a more long term goal before the end of the school year?"

Jim nodded along, digging his fingers into his jeans to distract himself from the hot, fluttery feeling sweeping over his entire body.

Was she suspicious? Did she pick up on how he wasn't actually planning on going anywhere? Was she going to call Dorrie the second he left her office?

"Ok, long term goal next time, I can do that,"

Beaming at him, she pulled a packet of papers off the top of the pile sitting on her desk "You don't have to use the guide to pick a goal, but if you have trouble thinking of one these should give you some ideas, now do you mind sending in the next student on your way out?"

Jim forced himself to stand up slowly and not just bolt out the door "Ok, no problem,"

"Thanks, have a good spring break,"

He managed to smile and give a half hearted 'You to' as he accepted the papers and stepped out of the office. Heading down the hallway back to the main waiting room, the jittery feeling crawling through his muscles diminishing but not completely going away.

It never did.

Glancing around the waiting room, he spotted the next person in line.

"Eli, you're up,"

Eli fumbled with the magazine in his hands before popping up out of his seat “Oh, thanks Jim,” he grabbed the magazine along with a stack of others from the floor before rushing down the hall. Jim craned his head to try and read the cover before Eli vanished around the corner.

Keep So-Cal Weird.

Jim rolled his eyes as he exited the main office. At least his goals wouldn’t be as weird as Eli’s. Although quite frankly he’d rather live in a world where they didn’t make freshmen discuss their goals with the guidance counselors.

It wasn’t like Jim didn’t have enough on his plate already.

He had no idea if guidance counselors and social workers talked to each other on a regular basis, but he had to play it safe and act like they did.

Especially since he was like 99% sure that all the teachers knew. He *knew* that Strickler knew, and he was pretty sure that Strickler had told all the other teachers. So it was more like he was 99.999% sure they all knew, and the 0.001% was just him kidding himself.

So now he couldn’t even come up with some kind of goals to give the guidance counselor without his anxiety going through the roof.

Jim all but threw his bag into the locker and slammed it closed with much more force than was needed, unable to stop himself from getting worked up.

This past month had been the absolute worst of his entire life.

It had started when he'd walked in on Dorrie and Charles going through their house and it hadn't really improved since.

When he and his mom had gone over their game plan that night after the initial panic it hadn't seemed all that bad. Be extra vigilant about making sure that no one saw anything weird and otherwise pretend that everything was normal. If they kept on top of it the investigation should fizzle out to nothing.

Simple enough.

And the first week hadn't been all that bad, tense but not bad. Week two had been nerve wracking but doable. Week three was when he really started having trouble sleeping, and it wasn't like he got tons of sleep to begin with. That snowballed to him starting to forget late night meals and nod off during the day, having to work even harder at keeping up the act during school.

Although if Jim was honest with himself he forgot most of those night time meals on purpose.

On top of that, week four was when he developed a stomach ache that wouldn't go away, not to mention learned that his hair was falling out. Now it was the end of week five and Jim couldn't remember a time when he wasn't stressed out, dead tired, and constantly felt like rats were chewing on his insides.

Grimacing, Jim pressed a hand to his stomach as he turned and headed to the cafeteria. Feeling sick and exhausted all the time sucked, but that was nothing compared to the everpresent, unrelenting, blood curdling dread.

The fear that he'd somehow let something slip. That right at this moment someone was coming to arrest his mom and take him away. All because of something Jim said or did.

Forget walking on eggshells, this was more like crawling through a minefield.

Every second that Jim was outside his house he had to be on guard; keeping himself under complete control at all times. Making sure that anyone watching, teachers, nurses, other classmates, wouldn't see anything worth reporting. No outbursts no meltdowns no nothing.

As far as anyone else knew the Lakes were a normal, happy family. And Jim had to act like it.

But after five weeks he knew that was a hell of a lot easier said than done.

Jim couldn't be sad or scared or angry any more, even about regular things. With so many people watching he couldn't afford to let them get the wrong idea. So regardless of what he was actually feeling at any given time, he forced himself to stay calm, plastered on a happy face, and continued along like everything was fine.

But he wasn't fine. Underneath his plastic smile Jim was coming apart at the seams.

He felt like a nerve with all the skin and muscle ripped away. Exposed to the cold air and completely vulnerable, ready to go off at the slightest touch.

Constantly keeping himself under control in front of all the teachers and every other adult in school was was bad enough, even without--

Jim stopped short as he stepped into the cafeteria, instantly spotting them sitting at a corner table. Five weeks ago the sight would have been somewhat soothing, now it was enough to make his heartbeat triple and intestines knot up.

Pulling in a shaky breath, Jim forced down the sudden bout of nerves.

He was in the middle of school in the middle of the cafeteria surrounded by other people. Now was not the time to lose it.

Five in. Hold for five. Five out.

Repeat

After a minute of deep breathing the full body shivers finally diminished to a much more manageable fluttering in his chest. Confident that he'd successfully gotten his emotions under control, Jim raised a foot and slowly resumed his approach.

Jim had been going back and forth about doing this for weeks, but this morning cinched it.

He was doing this. Today. Right here right now. Even if the idea of doing it felt like standing on the edge of a cliff.

Because the worst part of the past month hadn't been constantly being on guard or always being tired and nauseous. It was not knowing who'd he had to be on guard from.

A month ago, when he'd walked in on CPS in his house, Jim instantly knew one of his friends had blabbed.

While his immediate response had been to call Toby and demand answers, it didn't take very long for Jim to shift gears to shoving the thought into the back of his mind and keeping it there. Couldn't do anything to change it so there was no point to shoving his foot into that hornets nest. A with the way things had blown up when their problems with his mom first came out, forcing the issue might put him on the odds with all of them, and cost Jim the one part of his life that didn't actively suck right now. The only thing to do was let it go.

So Jim let it go.

But as the weeks went by, despite how much he actively tried not to think about it, small doubts kept sprouting up in the back of his mind like weeds.

Did Mary really mean it when she asked how he was doing or was she fishing?

Was Toby trying to be helpful by offering to help carry groceries in or was he looking for a chance to spy inside the house?

His heart shot up into his throat, pounding as he closed in on the table.

And while Jim knew it had to be one of the four of them that called, he still had no idea who it was. That meant he didn't know who it wasn't either.

So as much as he tried, as much as he *wanted* to, Jim could never completely relax around any of his friends.

It was bad enough being on edge with every single adult in his life, but not knowing which one of his friends had stabbed him in the back, and worse not knowing if they were waiting to do it again…..

Jim stopped in his tracks, table just inches away. The four of them chatting away, his presence still unnoticed. Heartbeat hammering in his ears.

This was going to be ugly but Jim just couldn't take not knowing any more. One way or another the truth was coming out *today*.

"I know one of you called the cops on my mom, so who was it?"

The four of them practically jumped in their seats before whirling around to face him. Claire was the first to find her tongue.

"What?"

Her eyebrows were knitted together in confusion. An expression shared by all the others sitting around her.

Somehow that made the lump of coal sitting in his ribcage smolder hotter even as his heart was threatening to beat out of it.

One of them knew exactly what he was talking about. One of them was only pretending to be confused.

“A month ago someone called CPS on my mom and I *know* it was one of you,” he made a show of narrowing his eyes and crossing his arms “So don’t try to deny it,”

They all turned and looked at each other, shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

Jim stood his ground, mouth set into a firm line and prickling doubts shoved down into the bottoms of his feet. There it was, the accusation out in the open. Whoever it was might try to deny it, but Jim knew it *had* to be one of the four of them, and he wasn’t going to let them weasel their way out of--

“Jim….” Toby spoke slowly, briefly meeting his eyes before looking away “We….all did,”

His heart stopped.

For a moment Jim wasn’t sure how to respond, wondering if he’d actually heard Toby correctly, then the world slowly started to turn again and the words sank in.

“…..you what?”

“It’s true,” he snapped his gaze over to Darci, she flinched but didn’t look away “After we tried...talking to you, the three of us went to my dad and showed him the photos,” she glanced over to Toby at her side “It was only after that we learned Toby also talked to someone about--”

Jim whirled on Mary “I thought you said you deleted those?!”

“I-- uh-- umm…” she squirmed in her seat “I....made……copies,”

Jim’s jaw fell open, unable to form words.

Out of all the possibilities, all the theories and ideas he’d had on who might have called, he’d never even dreamed that they’d all been in on it together.

His head was spinning, insides frozen and a roaring sound in his ears. Both hands rising up and fisiting through his hair, in a distant part of his mind he knew he shouldn’t be doing that since it was still falling out.

Just when he’d thought there couldn’t be anything else. That life couldn’t possibly throw anything worse at him--

Things became worse than he ever could have imagined.

He was faintly aware that the four of them were glancing around at each other from across the cafeteria table “Ok,” Claire laid both hands flat in front of her palms down “You have every right to be mad at us, but…”

Jim tuned her out, he couldn't bring himself to pay attention to whatever Claire was saying when his world was going to pieces right now.

He thought that when he figured out who had been the one to call CPS he could call them out for lying and get the rest of the group to back him up. That he'd figure out who he could actually feel safe with and finally be able to fix at least one part of his completely messed up life.

But it hadn't been one of them, it had been *all* of them. They'd torn his life apart and kept it a secret. They *lied* to him. Every day. For over a month.

Heat shot through him, flooding through his whole body until it felt like every ounce of blood in his veins was boiling.

It was his friends all along. All of them. They threw him and his mom under the bus and then they lied about it.

All the fear, all the worry. His inability to sleep or keep food down, the fact that his hair was falling out.

It was all because of them.

For the first time in weeks Jim wasn't scared, he was pissed as hell.

"I can't *believe* you guys!"

They all jerked back, eyes wide, shocked at the volume of his outburst.

"All of you knew about this," Jim felt nails stabbing into his palms from the force he was clenching his hands "And you *lied* to me about it for over a month!? How could you!?"

He was spitefully glad to see them all flinch and look deeply ashamed at that.

"Look Jim," Toby started to speak "I know you must be angry, but--"

He shriveled into silence under the glare Jim gave him.

How dare he. How *dare* he try and pretend like any of this was ok. The girls he could sort of see, but Toby was practically family. *His mom* had done more for Toby than anyone else would have in the same situation.

And Toby had still sold them out, with Claire, Darci, and Mary giving a helping hand.

Jim slowly turned to glare at each of them, the heat rushing over him blazing even hotter as he saw their pained faces and slumped shoulders.

Had they had secret meetings talking about this without him, had they *laughed,* snickering about being able to keep him fooled for so long.

Somehow a cold dribble of guilt managed to seep in past the white hot fire in his belly.

Even as blindingly furious as he was, for both himself and his mom, deep down Jim knew that wasn't true. The reason they made the call was because they felt they had no choice.

They hadn't done this as a joke, they were worried, they'd done this because they were *scared* for him. They'd done this because they wanted to help.

But despite knowing that, despite knowing that he was taking this too far and was going to regret everything he was saying as soon as he cooled off, Jim was too angry to care.

"I told you guys. My mom. *Doesn't. Hurt me.* " he got louder and louder with every word, until he was practically shouting, the raging inferno inside him demanding to be set free "Don't you get it? She could get arrested because of this, I could get taken away. *Did you even think about that at all!?* "

Toby shot up out of his seat with a bang, cutting off Jim's tirade. Glancing up at him out of sheer reflex, he saw that Toby had the edge of the table in a whiteknuclekd grip, every muscle in his body taut and trembling, eyes sharp as knives.

"No Jim. You don't get to do that." his voice was cold and harder than steel, harder than anything he'd ever heard coming out of Toby's mouth "You don't get to drop bombs like your mom locking you in the basement and expect us to pretend like everything's ok. And you don't get to act like we're the bad guys for trying to *help you* ,"

Jim found himself taking an involuntary step back. He'd never heard Toby this angry. *Ever*.

Prying his hands free, Toby stomped around the table towards him, Jim pinned in place under his molten gaze "You don't get to talk about lying when you were the one who's been lying all along. When you've been lying to *me* for years!"

"Tobes I--"

One look from Toby shut him up.

"But now you want to play honesty hour? Fine, we'll play honesty hour. How did you really get those scars on your ankle?"

The bottom fell out of Jim's stomach, taking every remaining drop of anger with it.

"……what?"

"Well?" Toby stopped two feet away, green eyes boring holes into him "Go on, tell me, where did those scars come from?"

Jim couldn't do anything but gape at him. The rehearsed answer, *they came from a fox bite* , sat in the back of his throat withering.

He couldn't know. It was impossible. Only two people in the world knew the truth. The act done in the dim of the early dawn in the middle of a remote forest.

Don’t worry sweetie, it's a sterile blade. A few quick cuts and a bandage on top should get you all the shots you need, no questions asked.

There was no way for Toby to know, but the look in his eyes told Jim that he *did.*

“How-- how--” he struggled to get the words out “How do you--”

Darci gingerly slid out of her seat to come stand next to Toby “Ok let’s all just take a deep breath and relax for a second,” she glanced over, her expression cool and professional, no longer holding any trace of guilt “Jim, I’m sorry we lied about what we did but I’m not sorry for doing it,”

“Darci’s right,” Mary stood and approached, Claire at her side “And we all agreed, what’s going on with your mom….that’s not ok, and we couldn’t just stand by and do nothing. I know your mom was probably really messed up when your dad walked out, but that doesn’t mean--”

The words hit him like a fist to the gut “How do you know about *that!?* ”

Mary shut her mouth, cheeks pink.

By now everyone in the cafeteria was turning and looking at them. And who could blame them with all the yelling. Jim knew that this was exactly the type of scene he needed to avoid, but all the emotions boiling up in his chest were too enormous and tangled and turbulent for him to make space to care about their audience.

Claire took half a step forward “Look Jim, I’m sorry we lied to you about reporting your mom, that was messed up and we shouldn’t have done it, but…” she inhaled, drawing herself up to full, regal height “But we wouldn’t have had to report her behind your back if you had just let us help you in the first place,”

“Yeah, you don’t get to talk to us about lying,” he spun back towards Mary. Hands on her hips, eyes narrowed into diamond hard points “If you had been honest with us from the beginning we wouldn’t have had to lie about *anything* ,”

Toby stepped to the front of the group, arms folded in front of him “To more tricks or lies. We need the truth Jim. The whole truth, about everything. The scars, the basement, your curfew,” his expression was granite, voice flint “Right here, right now.”

Jim staggered back, furiously glancing at each of their faces. Claire and Darci were stern and unmoving as statues, while Toby and Mary were full on glaring daggers into him.

How was this possible? How did they know all this?

He couldn’t get enough air, chest tight as he shrunk under the weight of the four sets of eyes on him.

What else did they know? If they knew about the scars and his dad and the basement, what else did they know? And how close were they to learning….the rest?

The one tiny, microscopic flicker of hope Jim had was that he knew that they still didn’t know about….his real secret.

If they did they sure as hell wouldn't be quiet about it.

But how close were they to figuring it out? They'd figured so much out already, it was probably only a matter of time.

And if this was how they responded to everything else, how would they react to learning that Jim was really a--

Icy daggers twisted in his gut.

He couldn't do this anymore.

He needed out *now*.

Jim turned and bolted, running out of the cafeteria as fast as his legs could carry him. Barely aware of his friends' shouts from behind him. But he couldn't outrun the panicked screaming in his skull.

They knew about his mom locking him up, they knew about how his dad left, they knew how he really got the scars on his ankle. Sooner or later they would figure out that Jim was the monster all along and when they did--

Throughout the years ideas of what would happen if people learned about his transformation had always flickered at the edge of his thoughts. Jim had done his best to force them out of his head and keep them from taking full shape, but now every horrible, twisted thought he'd had over the years surged to the front of his mind and refused to be buried.

If anyone learned his secret it was only a matter of time until the government found out, and when they did they wouldn't just let him run free. Jim's blue form was an unknown; wild, dangerous. At the very least they'd lock him in a cell and throw away the key. Or maybe they would send him off to some secret lab to get dissected and analyzed piece by piece.

His breath became choppy and ragged as he raced down the hall.

Or maybe Jim was too dangerous to leave alive at all, maybe they'd drag him away for a long drive into the desert that ended with a bullet to the back of his skull.

And his mom--

A jagged lump spouted in his throat.

Would they lock her up to? For keeping his secret as long as she did. But she hadn't broken any laws, maybe they'd just leave her alone? But then would they even tell her what they did with him? Or would she be left sitting alone in their house not knowing what happened to him while Jim sat in a prison cell, or got chopped to pieces in a lab, or rotted in an unmarked grave.

He could barely see the lockers rushing by him as heat built up behind his eyes. He was trembling all over now, blood rushing in his ears and scream building in the back of his throat.

Keep it together. Keep it together. Keep it together.

Jim was going to break down, he knew that. But he couldn't let it

happen in the middle of school. Not now, not again. Had to get out, go home, get somewhere safe.

Right now his secret was still under wraps, and the only way for Jim to keep those horrific ideas from becoming reality was to keep it that way.

And that meant not having another public meltdown.

Ignoring the sound of the bell, signalling other kids to start streaming into the hall, Jim scrambled up to his locker and started fumbling with the lock.

Despite his badly trembling hands he managed to get the locker open and pull his bag free, but in his haste to grab it the bag started slipping from his grip. Jim just barely caught the side in time to keep it from falling, but in doing so accidentally pulled the bag open, causing everything inside to spill out.

Jim could only watch in horror as textbooks clunked to the ground, papers scattering all over the floor, pens and pencils rolling in every direction. Insides curdling as he stared at the mess.

Why now? Why today of all days? On top of everything else--

His eyes stung.

Why couldn't he just get a break?

Trying and failing to force himself through his breathing exercises, Jim got down on his knees and struggled to gather the contents of his bag.

Somehow his efforts to gather the papers just spread them even more, the task made impossible by how badly he was shaking all over, breath coming in quick, quivering pants, teeth digging into his lip until he tasted copper, a storm roiling just beneath his skin.

He squeezed his eyes shut, grabbing a textbook and clenching his fingers around it so tight they hurt.

Get it together. Get it together. Get it together.

“Oh my god are you crying *again?* ”

Jim froze, inside and out, eyes shooting open to stare down at two of his pencils and the textbook he’d just grabbed off the floor. Familiar snide, smarmy voice coming from behind him.

“Dude he totally is!” Seamus said with a laugh “This is too good,”

Jim couldn’t move, nerves paralyzed. Every drop of emotion he’d had to deal with today, shock, anger, fear, and guilt, surging through him.

“ *Awww what’s the matter baby?* ” Steve jeered “Do you want a bottle?”

Seamus and Logan’s laughter echoed in his ears. From the corner of his eye he saw the traffic around them slowing as other people

stopped and stared. He couldn't feel his fingers any more, curled into rigid claws around the edges of the book.

And just like that Jim was *done.*

He threw his textbook against the lockers as hard as he could, unleashing a thunderous boom into the hall.

" *Fuck off Steve!* "

Steve, along with Logan, Seamus, and everyone else milling around in the hallway behind him, froze "What did you just say *Lake?* "

"You heard me Steve," Jim growled, stomping to his feet " *Fuck. Off.* "

Normally he would never lose his cool with Steve, the guy just wasn't worth it, but after everything that had happened today, everything that had happened over the last month, he just couldn't take it any more.

And Steve thought he was such a hot shot; popular, spot on the basketball team, grades good enough to keep it but not so good to be considered a nerd. But Jim knew a lot more than Steve thought he did.

Recovering from his surprise at Jim's outburst, Steve gave him his best sneer "Alright Crybaby you got about ten seconds to get down on your knees and apologize before I break your--"

“Oh can it Steve, like you have any business calling me crybaby when *you* were the one bawling in the locker room about how your *daddy* couldn’t come watch your big game!” Jim practically spat the words.

The smug look on Steve’s face vanished, eyes going wide and the color leeching from his skin “Wha-- how-- how did--”

“Since you can’t seem to figure it out I’ll spell it out for you, your dad doesn’t give a shit about you or your basketball games! And if you really want to make him happy go play in traffic so he doesn’t have to pay child support!”

A hush went through the crowded hall. Semus’s eyes were bugging out and Logan looked absolutely petrified; Steve himself was wearing the most hang-jawed expression Jim had ever seen.

More and more people were gathering around now, drawn by all the commotion. Jim knew it was bad to be drawing this kind of attention, especially after the stunt he just pulled on the cafeteria, but the dam inside him had burst and it felt so *so* good to finally let it all out.

Let someone else have the rug pulled out from under them. Let someone else feel exposed and vulnerable. Let someone else have their deepest darkest secrets thrown back in their face.

Let someone else be afraid for once. Someone who actually deserved it.

“Face it Steve you’re not special,” Jim’s voice practically dripped venom “You’re just some moron who thinks that if they dribble a basketball good enough they can get an even bigger moron to give two shits about them. It’d actually be funny if it wasn’t so pathetic,”

Even as he said the words, felt the thrill of finally being able to take Steve down a peg, a tiny trickle of guilt managed to creep in. For saying something so horrible, so wrong. That no one deserved to hear, not even Steve. But what little guilt he had was easily drowned out by the *massive* ocean of vindictive glee he felt now that Psycho Steve was getting to experience a tiny piece of what it was like to be Jim Lake.

The crowd around them was deathly quiet now, everyone stunned into silence by Jim's words. Shocked that he actually *went there.* With one exception.

Steve's face had gone from ghost white to purple, the veins in his neck bulging, hands balled into fists as his sides "You'd better shut your mouth Lake," his voice was soft but dangerous. Everyone, even Logan and Seamus, nervously edging away from him.

Unfortunately for him Jim just didn't care anymore.

"Or *what?* "

He stepped forward, unable to resist poking the bear "You gonna punch me in the face or something? Well go on, do it! You're only mad because I'm right!"

Another rush of spiteful satisfaction coursed through him when Jim saw the purple flush on Steve's face darken even further at his words, so much that he didn't even care that some of the onlookers had started to pull out their phones.

"Well what are you waiting for? Hit me, punch me, it's not gonna make a difference. It's not going to change the fact that you're a loser

who's life has fucking peaked!" he jabbed a finger into Steve's chest, getting right up into his face "That the only thing you have going for you is a spot on the basketball team. And after that all you have to look forward to is a dead end job at the gas station and at least two divorces!"

Steve was practically quivering with anger now, nostrils flaring, teeth clenched so hard he was surprised they hadn't cracked, but Jim could still see the flash of genuine hurt in his eyes "I'm warning you Lake--"

" *Because that's all you'll ever be, a loser! Maybe the real reason your dad left was because he finally figured out how much of a loser you really--* "

The blow took him by surprise, more than it probably should have. A dazzling flash of pain in his temple that snapped his head back into the lockers with a deafening bang as more pain flared in the back of his skull. Hot stars danced in his vision, the world around him spinning,.

Jim vaguely registered that he wasn't on his feet anymore, felt the linoleum under his back, the cool metal behind his shoulders and neck. Dimly heard the panicked shouts coming up from around him, even though he couldn't make out the words.

Blinking past the throbbing pain in his skull, and the warm trickle of something in his eye, Jim's sight cleared just long enough for him to see Steve's face, twisted into a mask of primal rage, and another fist rapidly approaching.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warnings (Language, Violence, Death, Dissection): Jim considers what might happen if his troll form was exposed; including being imprisoned, dissected, or killed by being shot in the head. Steve comes across a distressed Jim and begins teasing him. Jim snaps and verbally lashes out at Steve, exposing how

Steve was crying about how his dad couldn't come to his basketball game, saying this made Steve sad and pathetic and even implies that Steve's dad left because of how much of a loser Steve was. In response Steve lashes out physically at Jim, the chapter ending on a cliffhanger with Steve continuing to punch Jim.

Jim might be in mental and emotional turmoil over learning what his friends did. But at the end of the day he cares about them very deeply and there are certain lines he won't cross even in anger. However Steve hasn't earned that privlidge from him.

The friend group becoming angry with Jim after his accusations might have seemed from out of nowhere, but Jim wasn't the only one who's been scared for the past month. From their perspectives, they had to watch their friend go back to (what they presume to be) an abusive home every night. They've been scared that one day he'll show up at school hurt, or worse not show up at all. And they're worried (not unjustifiably) that if they say or do anything about it Jim will push them away and they won't even be able to meet up with him. On top of that they most certainly noticed Jim's change in mood and his constant state of stress, which only fueled their anxiety over the situation. So Darci, Mary, Claire, and Toby been scared and stressed for weeks on end to.

This combined with Jim accusing them of being dishonest when they know that's he's been deceiving them from the beginning was the spark that kicked off the emotional powder kegs they all have brewing. Toby was the first to shift to anger, he's known Jim the longest and is the most hurt by Jim's dishonesty and hypocrisy. And once the girls saw his reaction, it reminded them of Jim's own lies and reinforced how hypocritical he was being. Facilitating them shifting gears from shame to determination and self righteousness.

That being said, just because an emotional response is understandable, doesn't mean it was productive, helpful, or even fair. Each of the five of them is guilty of both being duplicitous and losing their temper. And after the dust has settled they're all going to be ashamed of how they let their own anger and hurt feelings get the better of them.

Next time: Barbara sees an unexpected patient come into the ER and is forced to make a tough decision.

Barbara

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: graphic description of injuries, mentions of violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dr. Lake that was the Blood Bank, they really want their cooler back,”

Barbara winced, three hours ago she’d had an eighty year old patient come in with a GI bleed and an H and H of 4 g/dl and 11%. She’d only just gotten them stable after a lot of frantic work and two emergency issue units of O Neg. Keeping track of the blood cooler had been the last thing on her mind.

But it would not pay to get on the Blood bank’s bad side. They were highly protective of their blood coolers, and they remembered everything.

“It should be in room three, if not let me know and I’ll help you look for it,”

The RN nodded once and then headed off in search of the wayward cooler.

Barbara waited a few more seconds before she allowed herself to lean back in her seat and take a sip of her water. The ED had finally calmed down to the point that she could afford to slip away from the floor and take a breather. Hopefully things would stay quiet enough that she could spend her fifteen minutes in peace.

Apparently that was too much to ask because four minutes into her break someone else was poking their head into the break room.

“Dr. Lake?” it was Miranda, the charge nurse for the ED who had been there twice as long as she had.

Barbara bit the inside of her cheek and forced her tone to be light “Yes?”

“We have an assault victim in the ED,”

The beginnings of a frown pulled at her lips. An assault victim, but not a full trauma that would require all hands on deck. If that had been the case they would have announced it over the intercom.

“Is Dr. Jenkins available to take care of them?”

“He is-- and he’s actually looking him over right now,”

This time Barbara let the frown show on her face “Then what do you need me for?” she was trying her darndest not to snap at Miranda, but for goodness sakes, she knew how precious their breaks were.

“That’s…that’s not why I came here,” Miranda dropped her gaze, taking a deep breath before she met Barbara’s eyes again “The assault victim…it’s…it’s Jim,”

For a moment time stood still, Barbara not registering what she had just heard. A few seconds staring at the pained expression on

Miranda's face was what it took for the truth to sink in.

The paper cup slipped from her fingers as she practically jumped out of her chair, heartbeat in her throat and limbs tingling with electricity. Barely heard water splashing against the linoleum past the roaring in her ears.

Suddenly taking a break was the last thing on her mind.

"Where is he?"

"Exam room twelve, and I already talked to Sue, she says you're good to take the rest of your shift off,"

Barbara was already out the door and moving "Thank you,"

Miranda gave her a nod just before she disappeared from sight as Barbara dashed around the corner.

An assault victim. Jim. *Her* Jim. Not a full trauma, she would have heard. His life wasn't at risk. But that didn't mean it couldn't be very *very* bad.

Glancing to the right, she kept an eye on the door numbers ticking by as she sprinted down the hall.

Eighteen, sixteen, fourteen, twelve--

Barbara stopped short, hands flying over her mouth, stifling her horrified gasp into a low whimper.

Jim was sitting on the exam room table holding an ice pack to his temple, blue jacket splattered in dark stains that could only be blood. She couldn't see his face clearly, Dr. Jenkins stood between them examining Jim's scalp while a large man in sweatpants loitered in the corner, twisting a baseball cap in his hands and watching Jim and Jenkins with an anxious look on his face.

As troubling as the sight was, it did give her a small measure of relief.

If Jim's injuries were critical he wouldn't be conscious and sitting upright. The fact that he was cognizant enough to sit there and calmly let Jenkins examine him was good news in and of itself.

Unfortunately that still left a lot of room for some very serious possibilities.

Stuffing her fears onto a shell of clinical composure, Barbara pulled open the door and stepped into the room "D-- Dr. Jenkins, how bad is it?"

All three of them turned towards her, allowing Barbara to see the full extent of Jim's injuries. The sight hit her like a fist to the gust, nearly making her stagger.

Jenkins had no doubt cleaned the worst of it up, but it still looked *awful.* From the neck up Jim's skin was punctuated by splashes of bright red where the skin was ripped open. Wounds ranging in size from short, thin cuts to gashes the size of a silver dollar. Most of them were already scabbed over, but some were fresh and oozing neon red blood. The skin that wasn't torn and bleeding was mottled with inky

dark bruises, colored in every shade from indigo to black. Both of his lips were split, his nose crooked; both puffed up to twice their normal size.

Jim lowered the ice pack, revealing that one of his eyes was swollen shut as well, and sluggishly looked over at her. His right eye, the only visible one, was bleary and unfocused, that was probably from--

“Did you give him morphine?”

Jenkins stammered for a moment before recovering “Ah uh yes, I did,”

“Did you check--”

“Dr. Lake,” Jenkins’ tone was soft but firm, his gaze even more so.

Barbara flushed.

Jenkins had been at the clinic for over seven years. He was every inch as skilled as she was; undercutting him like this was unprofessional, unhelpful, and downright rude.

Right now Jenkins was the doctor. Barbara’s job was to be a mother and be there for Jim.

“I-- I’m sorry,”

He let out a breath, shoulders relaxing “That’s ok, no harm done,

fortunately I can tell you right now that Jim does not have a concussion and all of his cuts are superficial, and should heal with minimal scarring,”

A massive weight lifted off her chest.

“That’s…that’s good to hear,”

“Uh loth a ooth an muh nuz,” Jim mumbled from the bench.

“Don’t try to talk, you could make your injuries worse,” Jenkins looked back towards Barbara, uncomfortable “However he did loose a tooth and I believe his nose is broken,”

Barbara’s stomach sank another inch.

“I’m just about done cleaning and dressing his injuries, once I’ve finished I can give you a more complete run down,”

She nodded slowly, willing the adrenaline to flow away as she stepped towards the exam table “Jim, hon, I know you’re probably feeling pretty lousy right now, but is there anything we can do for you?”

Jim lifted his head and shook it once, raising the ice pack back over his swollen eye.

Barbara had to swallow hard to keep the twisting feeling in her belly under control “Dr. Jenkins needs to finish looking you over, but I’ll be right here if you need anything,”

He looked her in the eye and nodded again. Barbara gently took one of Jim's hands in her own, giving his fingers a light squeeze. Looking back over towards Jenkins, she met his eyes and then inclined her head towards Jim, giving him the go-ahead to continue.

Taking the queue, Jenkins stepped back up and once again took Jim's scalp in his hands "Ok Jim remember, some pressure is normal, but if you feel any sharp pain let me know…"

Barbara stood vigil while Jenkins dressed Jim's injuries. Cleaning the skin with a damp cloth, Jim hissing as he did, closing the smaller cuts with butterfly bandages, taping gauze over the worst of them.

She forced herself to watch in silence, if Jenkins wanted her opinion he would ask for it, keeping her attention focused on Jim himself.

These weren't injuries from just a punch or two, someone had come after Jim with a frightening amount of violence. But who? And what exactly had happened? Jim should have been at school, had another student done this to him?

Curious, she glanced over at Jim's hands, both the one holding the ice pack and the one in her grasp. The skin over both of them was completely intact, untouched by bruises or cuts.

"Alright I think I've got everything taken care of for now," Jenkins stepped back and peeled off his gloves, gaze flickering between Barbara and Jim "Ok Jim, next I'd like to take you to get some x-rays done. I want to see if there's any other bone damage beyond what we can see in your nose, quite frankly I'm concerned about the possibility if a le fort fracture,"

Even though her guts were curdling at the thought of Jim dealing with a le fort fracture, Barbara nevertheless stayed composed and nodded tersely at his words “Ok,”

Jenkins let out a gusty sigh, running a hand through his hair “I’ll level with you Jim, we’re probably going to be keeping you overnight for observation,”

Her heart stopped “I-- I’m sorry, what?”

“Just as a precaution,” Jenkins raised a placating hand, misunderstanding the cause of her distress “I don’t want to risk aggravating any fractures, after we get the x rays back we’ll know a little bit more and be able to come up with a game plan,”

For his part Jim hadn’t reacted at all, most likely too out of it from the injuries and painkillers. But Barbara was doing enough panicking for two.

They couldn’t. That wasn’t an option. If Jim stayed in the hospital overnight everyone would see-- Oh god what if he actually needed *surgery* to repair some fractures? *How would they even* --

With tremendous force of will, Barbara smothering her rising panic and schooled her features to show only the appropriate amount of concern while she helped Jim to his feet.

Now was *not* the time to lose her cool, and there was a chance Jim would be discharged before sundown and she would have nothing to worry about. The only thing she knew for certain at the moment was that Jim *needed* to get those x-rays done.

With her guiding arm around his shoulders, she was able to pull a sluggish Jim to the door, following along behind Jenkins. They headed down the hall to the ED's imaging room, Barbara easing Jim down into one of the waiting chairs when they got there. Jenkins poked his head into the room, exchanging words with one of the techs.

"It should just be a minute while they get everything ready,"

Jim leaned back in his chair with a groan, Barbara laying a hand on his shoulder.

"Umm...excuse me, Dr. Lake,"

Startled, Barbara looked over to see the large man she'd first noticed in the exam room, with everything that had been going on she'd all but forgotten he was here.

"I'm, uh….Coach Lawrence, from your son's school. Do you mind if we talk for a bit?" his eyes flitted back and forth "Somewhere private?"

"I'm not sure if…." Barbara glanced back.

Jenkins gave her a nod "Go ahead, I'll take care of Jim while we wait for the x-ray,"

Her gaze flickered over to Jim, who gave her a single affirmative nod.

Pulling her professional shell tight around her, Barbara turned back towards Lawrence “Ok, let’s step over into the lounge,”

They hustled to the small room at the end of the hall, Barbara shutting the door behind them “What happened to my son?”

Lawrence flinched “Jim was...in an altercation with another student,”

“An altercation? You mean a fight!?”

He flushed “Yes-- ummm…a fight,”

Despite being incredibly anxious about the extent of Jim’s injuries, and terrified of the possibility that he might need to be admitted, Barbara still found room to be absolutely furious.

“I saw his hands, they were completely clean; no cuts, no bruises, no defensive wounds. This wasn’t a fight, my son didn’t throw a single punch,”

With every word she said Lawrence squirmed even more “You’re….you’re not wrong, in any case principal Levit and superintendent Kuhn would like to have a a meeting tomorrow morning, to go over exactly what happened, with both boys and their parents present,”

Barbara could *feel* her face darken “You want my son in the same room as the boy who did *that* to him?”

Despite the fact that he towered above her Lawrence was shrinking under her gaze “The superintendent wants everyone involved there,” he jabbered out in a high pitched voice “Steve, the other student involved, is...also making accusations,”

Her heart skipped a beat. Steve, that was a name Barbara had heard before.

Standing a little taller now, Lawrence continued “But both myself and a police officer will be present at this meeting to ensure everyone’s safety,”

Barbara sucked in a deep breath through her nose. She was not pleased at hearing this. But now, especially now, she needed to pick and choose her battles carefully.

“Fine, we’ll be there,”

Lawrence looked surprised at how quickly she agreed, but nevertheless nodded gratefully “Alright then, I’ll send you an email with more details,” he took half a step towards the door and paused “I’m...I’m sorry, I should have prevented this, but I failed and a student go hurt on my watch,”

He turned back, glint of steel in his eyes “And I promise, I will not let anything happen to Jim at tomorrow’s meeting.

Momentarily caught off guard, it took Barbara a few seconds to find her tongue “Th-- That sounds good, I’ll see you tomorrow,”

Lawrence nodded in acknowledgement before he turned and left,

heading out the door and walking away down the hall.

Barbara let out a breath, and then pulled one in. Breathe for five, hold for five, exhale for five; repeat.

Steadier now, Barbara headed out of the break room and back towards imaging. Seeing the waiting chair empty and the In-Use sign lit up, she discreetly stepped through the side door that lead into the observation booth. Jenkins was there, along with the tech, and through the window she could see Jim laying on the table with the x-ray machine hovering above him.

She and Jenkins locked eyes and nodded in silent greeting as she stepped up to his side. Watching Jim lying back with the large machine looming as it beamed radiation into his skull. But one glance at the clock on the wall was all it took to remind her of what was at stake.

They had a little time left, but not much.

Jenkins had mentioned he was mostly thinking about keeping him overnight to avoid aggravating his injuries. Maybe she could convince him that taking Jim home where he could relax would be better for him mentally? No, that wouldn't be well received. Jenkins would interpret that as Barbara undercutting his professional opinion. Which to be fair, it was. But that meant she had to consider…

"Have you decided what to prescribe him yet?" she whispered

Jenkins gave a little start of surprise "Some ibuprofen for the pain and inflammation, along with antibiotics to prevent infection,"

“Would it be alright if you wrote it out now so I can go pick it up?”

“Don’t you want to….” his gaze slid over to where Jim was lying on the x-ray table.

Barbara had to strain to keep her tone light, already feeling slimy from the lie she was about to tell to someone she trusted and respected a great deal “I know Jim’s in good hands with you, I just need to take a step back and clear my head,”

Jenkins relaxed, making the weight of guilt on her chest triple, and pulled out his prescription pad, quickly scribbling on it before handing the top slip over “Ok then Dr. Lake, we’ll finish up here and meet you back in the exam room,”

She thanked him and then hurried out of the room and towards the pharmacy at the other end of the hospital, praying there wouldn’t be a line. In a miraculous stroke of luck the pharmacy was nearly empty, and Barbara was able to get Jim’s medicine in record time.

Rushing back to the exam room, paper bag tucked safely under her arm and throat tightening when she saw the time, Barbara stepped in and saw Jim once again sitting on the exam table talking with Jenkins.

The other doctor turned at the sound of the door opening

“Oh Dr. Lake, you’re just in time. I just got the x-ray results back, we were waiting for you to discuss them,”

She managed to give him a weak smile as she stepped to Jim’s side

“Thank you, so what are we looking at?”

Beaming, Jenkins stepped over to where the black and white images were already set up in the illuminator “I’ve got good news,” he traced a finger just under where Jim’s left eye would be “Both of the orbital sockets and zygomatic arches are completely intact, and I see no signs of a le fort fracture,”

Cool relief washed over her, practically knocking Barbara off her feet. Sockets and arches intact, no le fort fracture. It wasn’t as bad as it could be “That’s really good to hear,”

Jenkins flashed her a small grin, before his expression quickly turned somber “However your nose is indeed broken,” he pointed to the image on the far left, where sure enough, the nasal bone was clearly separated from the frontal bone by a large fissure.

“And there is some cracking along the angle of your mandible,” he moved his fingers to trace the image of Jim’s jaw. Barbara had to squint this time, but the cracks were there.

Lowering his hand, Jenkins turned to face them fully “You’ll have to get looked over by a specialist, I think Dr. Nahreini might be available, but there is a change that these might need to be corrected with surgery,”

Barbara fought not to react to those words “Do you know how soon we can see Dr. Nahreini?”

Jenkins rubbed his chin thoughtfully “I’m not sure, I’d have to check his schedule, although, assuming surgery isn’t needed, the absolute soonest he could be able to correct these would be tomorrow,”

Her heartbeat skyrocketed. That was not good, there was still a chance Jenkins wouldn't keep Jim overnight, but they were out of time and the risks were too high for her to take that gamble. Which left Barbara with only one option. Just the thought of what she was about to do was almost enough to make her physically ill, but she had no other choice.

Not unless she wanted Jim's transformations exposed to the entire hospital.

"Do you mind looking at his schedule right now? I'd like to be able to make a plan as soon as possible,"

Jenkins raised an eyebrow at her, but he looked curious rather than suspicious "Ok then, I'll be right back,"

She smiled and nodded as he stepped out the door, even as her pulse pounded in her ears, the smile dropping off her face the second he left. Barbara waited half a minute before cautiously peeking her head out the door. When she saw the hallway was empty she knew they had to move fast.

"Ok Jim we need to go, up up up,"

Jim looked confused, or perhaps he was still in a daze from the morphine, but nevertheless complied and got to his feet.

After one more glance up and down the hall and then Barbara was hurrying out of the room, steering Jim in front of her by the shoulders.

With every step her heartbeat ratcheted up a notch, terrified that someone would see her and ask what the hell she was doing. They managed to get to the parking lot without incident, although seeing the sun touching the horizon did give her a miniature MI.

"Ok sweetie just lie down in the back seat now,"

After she opened the door for him Jim flopped down on the back seat; groaning and clutching his jaw. Barbara winced and hustled into the driver's seat. Ice settling in her ribcage and creeping out through her veins as she started the car and pulled out of the parking lot and into the street.

And despite the fact that the sun would be down in a matter of minutes and this was the only way to keep Jim's secret from being exposed. The guilt of what she'd just done, both as a mother and a doctor, pounded into her like a hammer.

This is abuse. Depriving children of medical care is abuse. And you should know, didn't your own mother refuse to get you glasses until high school.

Barbara jerked in her seat when she saw the flash of motion in the rearview mirror and heard a whine of protest from the carseats. Jim's groans becoming husky.

The chill in her blood somehow became even colder. Suddenly she was *very* aware of each and every other car on the road, of the people walking on the sidewalk not six feet away.

Please don't let anyone notice. Please just let us get home safe.

There would be consequences for this. Severe consequences. She may even lose her job, and honestly Barbara deserved much worse. But that didn't matter right now. What mattered was keeping Jim safe.

The twenty minute drive felt like a lifetime, but finally she was pulling into their garage, door lowering shut behind them.

The second the door shut for good Barbara allowed herself only one deep, shuddering breath, to dispel the frost in her chest, then she was up and out of her seat. Going around and reaching in to help Jim extract himself from the back of the car.

"That's it honey, inside to the couch, we're almost there,"

They were home now. There would be a reckoning for what Barbara had done, but for now they were safe.

She managed to herd Jim inside towards the living room, where he promptly collapsed on the couch with a grunt, raising the ice pack back over his eye. The constriction from his now too small clothes couldn't be helping anything. But helping Jim into more comfortable clothes would have to wait until she took care of more pressing matters.

While Jim settled himself on the couch, Barbara gave him a once over. From what she could tell at a glance it didn't look like the shift to his blue form had made Jim's facial injuries any worse, of course it hadn't made them any better either. The swelling looked strange transferred over to more angular features. Blue skin giving all of his bruises a navy cast. But what shocked her the most was that, while the bits of old dried blood on his skin were still rusty brown, the fluid leaking from his uncovered cuts was a brilliant, royal blue.

Barbara could spend time puzzling over the implications of that later, right now she had bigger fish to fry.

Scurrying into the kitchen, Barbara grabbed a glass from the cabinet and ripped open the prescription bag. First Jim needed to take a dose of painkillers. He was already probably coming down from the morphine they gave him at the clinic, so she needed to get the ibuprofen into his system as fast as possible. Especially if he wanted any chance at sleep tonight.

“uh...muh,”

Barbara unscrewed the cap from the first bottle and looked down at the tiny pills. Should she alter the dosage to Jim’s new height and weight? No, she didn’t know near enough about these drugs or Jim’s nighttime physiology to risk playing with medications. They’d just have to give him the prescribed dosage and hope for the best.

“Muh,”

Her eyes flickered back towards the glass she’d pulled out. Jim shouldn’t have any of these on an empty stomach. But solid foods were out of the question. Water was good but he should have something substantial to. Broth maybe? Applesauce? But right now neither of those things were palatable to him. He really liked motor oil when he was blue but Barbara had no idea how nutritious that actually--

“Mah!”

She snapped her head over towards the couch. Jim was lying propped

up against the end, working his jaw to try and form words.

“Sweetie sweetie--” Barbara hurried over towards his side “Don’t talk right now, we don’t know how badly your jaw was damaged, any kind of talking or movement could make things worse,”

Jim slackened against the couch, only for one arm to fumble for the notebook and sharpie on the coffee table. Grabbing them, he scribbled something on the notebook and then flipped it around.

This ok?

“Yes that should be fine,”

Although now Barbara wished they were both fluent in ASL, that would make this a lot smoother. And she didn’t know if it was the morphine wearing off or the shift to his blue form, but it was clear from the focus in his eyes and the alertness in his posture, that Jim was now completely lucid.

“You just lie there and try to relax, I’m going to get you your medicine and then--”

A hand on her wrist stopped her from heading into the kitchen.

Barbara immediately turned back to face him “Jim, what is it? Do you need something?”

He looked up and met her eyes, and despite the swelling and the

bruises and the overall shift of Jim's features into something other than human, one look at her son's face and Barbara could tell that he was completely heartbroken.

I need to tell you something

Barbara pulled into the school parking lot, glancing at Jim from the corner of her eye, nose freshy reset and bandaged.

This morning they'd gone back to the hospital as early as they could, where Jenkins and Nahreini were waiting for them. Like she knew they would be in the very strongly worded email Jenkins had sent her last night.

The only positive things about their return visit was that Nahreini had been able to reset Jim's nose by hand under local anesthesia. And he'd determined from the CT scan that surgery, or even getting the mandible fixed in place, wouldn't be necessary. Just rest and a liquid diet.

Although they did have to be at the dentist at noon to get Jim's missing tooth checked out.

Nahreini had volunteered to go with Jim to the dentist, claiming that he needed to make sure the dentist was fully aware of the damage on Jim's jaw, but the way he'd looked at Barbara while he said it made it clear that this was less of a favor and more that he didn't trust her to make appropriate choices regarding Jim's medical treatment.

She'd taken him up on the offer all the same.

The rest of her coworkers hadn't said anything, but the way they'd looked at her had said it all.

They'd looked at her like she was one of *those* parents. That thought they knew better than the trained medical professionals. One of *those* doctors. That developed an ego and refused to work as a team.

And even if Jenkins hadn't made it explicitly clear to her in the hallway while Nahreini was resetting Jim's nose, there was an email burning a hole in her inbox.

While Jim was at the dentist this afternoon, Barbara would be sitting down with the medical director to discuss her future at Arcadia Oaks Medical Center.

Needless to say Barbara wasn't looking forward to that, quite frankly she was still amazed that they'd cleared them to go to this meeting at the school in the first place. Of course this meeting wasn't anything she was looking forward to either.

Last night Jim had managed to give her the full story of what happened through notes scrawled on the notebook he now carried with him everywhere.

Some of the things he'd told her had been more or less what Barbara expected, but some of it had shaken her to her core.

Even over twelve hours later she was still reeling.

Barbara glanced over to Jim in the passenger seat “You ready?”

Looking up, he gave a curt nod.

Forcing down the lump in her throat, she stepped out of the car, Jim following, and headed into the building. It was the same as it had been last September, right down to the sour faced receptionist directing them into a large conference room.

Everyone else was already there. A balding man with a bushy mustache that she knew to be principal Levit sitting at the table with a gray haired woman, presumably superintendent Kuhn, by his side. A laptop along with several stacks of papers on the table in front of them. Lawrence and a woman in a police officer’s uniform standing behind them. Sitting across from them was a blonde boy, arms folded and glaring out the window, and a blonde woman right next to him. Steve and his mother. Next to them were two empty chairs awaiting their arrival.

Their heads swivelled towards them at the sound of the door opening “Oh good you’re here,” Levit gestured towards the empty chairs “Please have a seat, we’re just about to get started,”

Barbara nodded in acknowledgement as she and Jim took their seats, Barbara next to Steve’s mother and Jim on her other side, the boys separated by the two women. Unsurprisingly, Jim’s numerous bruises and bandages drew stares from everyone in the room.

“So uh…..Jim,” Lawrence said slowly “You doing better?”

Jim flipped a few pages on his notebook and held it up.

Can’t talk jaw busted

The awkward atmosphere in the room intensified.

“Oh-- ummm….ok,”

For a few seconds they all sat in complete silence. Levit glanced from side to side at the four people in front of him and let out a husky sigh.

“Barbara Lake, Naomi Palchuk, glad to see you here, although I wish we were meeting under better circumstances,”

His gaze flickered back and forth between the two of them again, before he sucked in a deep breath and netted his fingers in front of him “Let’s get right to it. Yesterday after Mr. Lake spilled the contents of his backpack in the hallway Mr. Palchuk came over and began….teasing him,” Levit paused, seeming to struggle for the right words “In response Mr. Lake lashed out verbally, after which Mr. Palchuk lashed out physically. Do both of you agree that this summary of events is accurate?”

“Yes,” Barbara replied, that lined up with what Jim had told her.

“Yes, we do,” Naomi parroted.

Both of their sons stayed silent.

Levit glanced over to Kuhn, the two of them sharing an uncomfortable look, before Levit turned back to them “Are either of you aware of the existence of a video?”

Naomi’s eyes went huge “A video?”

“N-- no I’m not,” Barbara stammered out.

This was news to her, Jim hadn’t mentioned any kind of video.

Levit grimaced before opening his laptop “Yesterday evening it came to our attention that someone had taken a video recording of the incident and posted it online, where it’s already started circulating through the community,” after tapping at the keyboard a few times he turned the laptop towards them “ I would like to show this video to you in the interest of full disclosure, although if you don’t want to watch that is perfectly acceptable,”

“No,” Barbara said, forcing her voice to sound steadier than she felt “I want to see this,”

Grim faced, Naomi nodded along with her.

Mouth twisting in an effort to suppress a deep wince, Levit pressed play on the video. The footage was shaky and blurry, clearly done with a cell phone camera. It showed one of the school halls crowded with students, the occasional elbow or shoulder cutting into the view. Jim and Steve took up the majority of the screen, both of them looking quite hostile. Jim was getting up in his face and yelling, but between the loud hallway and the poor audio quality it was impossible to determine what he was saying. Then in a flash Steve swung up his fist and knocked Jim to the ground. Getting on top of him and punching him repeatedly in the face, teeth bared in a furious

snarl. One of his punches landed with a sickening crack, blood spraying across the lockers. But Steve didn't even slow down.

Barbara felt a hand fly over her mouth, from beside her she heard Naomi let out a gasp.

She couldn't look away, the hole in her stomach getting deeper and deeper as she kept watching. Just looking at Jim's injuries had given her a good idea of just how brutal the attack had been, but knowing didn't prepare her for actually seeing it happening with her own two eyes.

Jim didn't watch, silently staring down at the floor, although he had to have heard. Glancing over on impulse, Barbara saw that Steve was still staring out the window, jaw clenched and arms folded. But only now did she notice the bandages wrapped around his knuckles.

Steve had beaten Jim so viciously that he'd actually damaged his own hands.

On the screen Steve's attack continued for about thirty seconds before a large blonde teacher swooped into frame and wrestled Steve off of Jim. Then the video cut abruptly and ended. Levit shut the laptop with a click "The school is still looking into who posted it and trying to get the video taken down, but you know how these things are once they get out there…"

Barbara did know. Once something was up on the internet it was out there forever. Now there was a video of her son being assaulted that was out there for all the world to see.

"Now Dr. Lake," Kuhn sat up straighter and steepled her fingers "Typically we try to resolve these matters within the school, but given

the severity of the situation I understand if you would want to press criminal charges,”

Her eyes briefly landed on the policewoman, who for her part remained impassive.

“If that is something you want to do you would have the school’s full cooperation. I only ask that you let us know what you decide to do as soon as possible,”

The room went silent, everyone watching Barbara with bated breath.

“I…I’m really not sure here,” Barbara said slowly “I would like to see what the school decides to do before I make my final decision,”

Levit nodded at her words “That seems fair. Jim, do you agree?”

Jim gave a quick nod in return.

“I’m sorry but given the circumstances we’re going to need an actual--”

A quick scribble of the sharpie and Jim was holding up another note.

I agree with everything my mom just said

Levit leaned back “Alright then, given that we all agree on how the events transpired, Lawrence and I--” the coach stepped up to his side

“Would like to propose this course of action,”

He looked over and addressed Steve directly for the first time “Suspension for the rest of the school year, effective immediately, along with mandatory biweekly sessions with the school psychologist, starting this year and into the next,” Levit pulled a chunk of papers off the stack in front of him “Mr. Palchuk this means that you will not be allowed to attend class or any school activities until the start of the next school year in August. We will provide you with supplemental educational materials to keep up with your coursework for this semester and arrange for you to take your final exams at the district offices, in addition you will also start seeing the school psychologist there as well,”

Steve leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table and unintentionally putting the bandages on display “Ok...but I’ll still be able to play on the basketball team...right?”

Kuhn’s eyes narrowed “Sports teams are included under extracurricular activities, all of which you are not going to be allowed to attend,”

“B...but the finals are in two weeks!”

Lawrence stared down at him evenly “Then it looks like you’re going to miss them, you’ll have to try again next year,”

Steve’s face fell, he looked so sad and lost. And even though her own son was sitting next to her with a cracked jaw and broken nose; Barbara couldn’t help but feel a swell of pity for Steve.

He may have been the one who hurt Jim so badly he couldn’t see out of one eye, but he was just a child to. And what Jim had said to

him….she couldn't believe her own son was capable of being so cruel.

Her ribcage tightened.

No, with what Jim had just learned she absolutely believed he could.

Steve slammed a fist against the table, face flushed scarlet "But this isn't *fair* !"

Barbara reflexively angled herself in front of Jim while Naomi placed two restraining hands on her own son. Jim didn't react in the slightest, just kept hanging his head in silence.

"Steve please I know y--"

"But if *he* --" Steve stabbed an accusatory finger in Jim's direction "Hadn't *pushed* me! I never would have--"

"Banned," Lawrence said stonily, folding his arms across his chest.

"W-- what?" Steve stammered out.

"Not only are you suspended for the rest of the year, but you won't be coming back to the basketball team *ever,* " the chill in his voice was glacial "Not in two weeks, not next year, or any year after that,"

"But-- I-- you can't--"

“ *That’s enough Palchuk* !” Lawrence bellowed, causing everyone in the room except Jim to jump “Not only are you permanently barred from the basketball team, but if you put a single *toe* out of line, I’ll see you banned from every sports team in the district!”

“B-- buh--”

“And if you screw it up again,” Lawrence got up close, hands balled in fists at his sides, tone dropping dangerously low “Then we’ll start talking about *real* consequences,”

Steve sat there mouth gaping open and shut like a fish, shocked into silence.

“I’m going to give you a real hard truth Palchuk,” he stepped back and refolded his arms “In life there’s no trouble so deep that you can’t get yourself deeper. So if you don’t want this to get *significantly* worse than it already is. *Stop. Digging.* ”

Steve sat back and shut his mouth. Face red.

Things were silent for a few beats before Naomi spoke up, voice brittle “Thank you, we find that punishment more than acceptable,”

Barbara gave a brusque nod “That sounds acceptable to me as well, I don’t think criminal charges need to be added on top of that,”

The school was taking this seriously. Besides, another investigation was the last thing she and Jim needed.

Naomi, Kuhn, and Levit all visibly relaxed at that, the principal glancing over towards Jim “Do you agree Jim?”

Once again he held up the note.

“And would you both agree to make official statements stating your decision to not press charges?” the policewoman spoke for the first time.

“Yes, we can do that today,”

Yes

“I believe that will be all for you Ms. Palchuk,” Levit handed her the papers in his hands “Here’s the formal statement of Steve’s suspension, with my contact information attached. We’ll email you a copy as well, along with the forms for the school psychologist. We’ll put together the educational material for Steve’s suspension and get it to you before the end of Spring break. And if you have any questions or concerns please don’t hesitate to contact me directly,”

Naomi bobbed her head up and down while grabbing the papers, muttering a quick ‘thank you’ before pulling Steve up and hustling him towards the door. It looked like she couldn’t get out of here fast enough. Not that Barbara could blame her.

After the door shut behind them Barbara let out a small sigh of her own and started to rise out of her seat. Finally they could cross this off their list and get back to--

“Actually Dr. Lake we’re not quite done here,”

She froze midway out of her chair, Jim perking his head up.

“I’m sorry?”

The look Levit and Kuhn shared with each other made her uneasy “Steve’s actions were reprehensible, regardless of what Jim said, but by the same note we can’t ignore what Jim said to him only because Steve lashed out inappropriately,”

Barbara numbly sank back into her seat, queasy feeling burning to life in her gut “So…what are you saying?”

Levit leaned forward “We would like to have Jim meet with our school psychologist twice a week for the rest of the school year, and possibly next year as well,”

The word mandatory hadn’t been said, but Barbara heard it loud and clear.

She swallowed hard “Ok,”

“Now if it’s alright there are a few things we’d like to discuss with Jim,” he paused “Alone,”

Her stomach gave another sickening lurch “But…he…”

Jim scribbled and held his notebook up towards her.

It's ok I'll be fine

She met his eyes, and even past the bruising and swelling she could read his desperate plea loud and clear.

We can't afford to make this any worse.

"Al...alright then,"

"Now Dr. Lake if you don't mind," Levit gestured towards a door on his left "Please go wait in my office while we have our discussion with Jim,"

Barbara nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and got to her feet. Allowing herself one final glance at Jim before she stepped out the door.

These were teachers, professionals, they knew how to talk to sick and injured children. Jim would be just fine with them. There was no reason for her to wo--

Barbara stopped dead in her tracks, door slipping from her grip and swinging shut behind her. Dread pooling in the pit of her stomach. Sitting at the desk in front of her was the one person she did not want to be involved right now.

"Hello Dr. Lake," Dorrie said "I really wish we were meeting under

better circumstances,”

Barbara couldn’t speak past the jagged block of ice in her throat.

Dorrie turned in her chair towards her “I’ll get straight to the point. Yesterday the school contacted me after Jim was attacked, and I had planned on reaching out to you yesterday evening, but then one of your coworkers contacted us and claimed that you left the hospital with Jim without being discharged,” she folded her hands in her lap “After hearing that I brought all three of us together yesterday afternoon to determine exactly how events unfolded,”

On the inside, past the screaming panic in her ears, Barbara was kicking herself. How could she have been so stupid. Of course the school was going to notify CPS when they had an open investigation on them. Of course her coworkers were going to follow protocol.

Of course these people were going to talk with each other.

Dorrie’s expression was stern “What you did yesterday shows a profound lack of judgement, and while it was good that you brought him back this morning, you never should have taken Jim away from the hospital the way you did in the first place. As a doctor you should know better,”

“I…I understand,” Barbara forced the words out “It won’t happen again,”

Dorrie was unmoved, and why wouldn’t she be? There was no excuse for what Barbara did. And if Barbara really regretted what she’d done then why did she do it in the first place?

“Right now you and I are going to have a discussion about the events of yesterday and what we are going to do going forward,” she pulled a three ring binder stuffed to the brim with papers out of her bag “And while at this point it is not necessary to consider extreme action, let me make it clear that you will no longer be Jim’s primary care provider,”

The cold pit of horror in her belly deepened even as Barbara nodded along in reluctant agreement, sinking into the chair across from Dorrie.

Reluctant because that was the last thing she wanted to be dealing with right now. Agreement because Barbara knew that she ultimately had no choice.

Last night when Jim had told her that his friends had been the ones who called CPS...she honestly didn’t know whether she was shocked or not.

They’d never given any indication that they’d thought something was wrong, and she’d known Toby since he was in kindergarten. It was hard to believe that he-- that they would go so far as to….

Her nails dug into the fabric of her skirt.

Then again, the kids weren’t in kindergarten anymore, and a teenager noticed a lot more than a five year old did.

At the end of the day Barbara just couldn’t blame them for bringing this trouble to their door. They’d seen a concerning situation with multiple red flags and taken the appropriate actions to help. They were all good, sweet kids who just wanted their friend to be safe.

And they weren’t the ones who’d snuck a badly injured, drugged patient out of the hospital without being discharged, or locked a young child in the basement for years. The reason you’re sitting here is because of you and no one else. And don’t you forget it.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about you guys, but Rise of the Titans motivated me to write like nothing ever before....through spite.

And for those wondering how Jim got to the hospital, after Uhl wrestled Steve off of him; Lawrence checked him over for signs of a concussion or serious head trauma, utilizing his knowledge of sports medicine. Finding none he elected to drive Jim to the hospital in his own car for the simple reason that no one involved in this situation can afford an ambulance.

So the way Jim's injuries transfer between forms is that the size changes, but the severity remains consistent. Gets run over by a truck in troll form, just bruises and scrapes in human form, broken nose as a human, broken nose as a troll. This means Jim doesn't have to worry about injuries acquired in troll form becoming more severe in human form. But on the flip side, if he gets badly injured as a human, a shift to troll form isn't going to heal him.

Edit: Sorry I just realized that some of the wording towards the end is a little misleading. In the states, every person has a main doctor they go to for yearly check ups and general health concerns, this is their primary care provider. If they have a specific problem they need to go to a specialist. For example, when I started having foot pain I went to see my primary care provider, who sent me to another doctor who specializes in foot care.

Normally Jim would be seeing a pediatrician, a doctor who specializes in children's health, as his primary care provider. But Barbara bent the rules a little bit and made herself Jim's primary care provider in order to better cover for Jim's night time transformations.

So when Dorrie says "while at this point it is not necessary to consider extreme action, let me make it clear that you will no longer be Jim’s primary care provider" she's saying that they

aren't going to be taking Jim away and putting him in a foster home, but because of what she did Barbara can no longer be his doctor.

Hope this clears things up.

Toby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toby's chest hurt so bad it actually felt like someone was literally stabbing him in the heart. Still he didn't slow down, if anything he pedaled even harder.

The girls were riding neck and neck with him, in just as much of a hurry to reach their destination.

He shouldn't have flipped out at Jim yesterday. He shouldn't have thrown back what he knew about the scars on his ankle just because he was pissed. Now this whole thing was ten times worse and it was all his fault.

It had been so hard, watching Jim go home every day for the past month and forcing himself not to say anything, even when Jim started to look more and more anxious every day. But you know who had it even worse? The guy doing the actual suffering.

Toby had heard the phrase victim blaming before, but he never really got it until now. He'd just been so insanely furious hearing Jim yell at them for lying when he hadn't said an honest thing to them in months, and when they'd been doing everything they could to help him he hadn't responded right--

The guy's mom locked him in the basement and slashed up his ankle; what the hell was the 'right' way to act after that?

Now Jim was hurt really bad and he'd had to go to the hospital and he

wasn't in school today and he wasn't answering his phone--

Toby *needed* to see if Jim was ok.

A throbbing pain that had nothing to do with the strain of pedaling uphill stabbed through his chest.

Or if not ok, alive and kicking.

He skidded to a stop on Jim's lawn, stumbling off of his bike and running up to pound on the front door " *Jim you've got about ten seconds to open this door before I'm breaking it down!* "

Ok maybe that was the wrong thing to start off with considering he was there to apologize, but Toby would just add it to the list of things to grovel for forgiveness for *after* he saw that Jim was alright.

And just when he was about to make good on his threat, a hand grabbed his shoulder and started tugging him away. Toby jerked around to see who it was.

"Don't try to stop me Darci,"

Her expression was soft in a way that made him feel even worse "I'm not, but Toby, I don't think anyone's home. All the lights are off and the car's gone,"

He snapped back around, heart plummeting when he saw that she was right.

Jim and Dr. Lake weren't here.

"And your Nana's watching,"

Toby whirled, spotting Phil, one of Nana's chess buddies, sitting in his car in their driveway with Nana stepping into the passenger seat. He stood there frozen for a few seconds before darting around Darci and sprinting across the cul de sac.

"Nana, wait! Stop stop stop!"

Phil, clearly startled, stopped the car in the middle of the street, Nana rolling down her window and poking her head out "Toby? What on earth is the matter?"

Besides the fact he didn't want Nana witnessing him busting into Jim's house, just because Jim had gone radio silent on them didn't mean that Nana had stopped talking to Dr. Lake. So there was a chance she knew something they didn't.

He slowed to a stop, panting "Have-- have you- have you heard what's going on with Jim?"

Immediately her face shifted from confused to contrite "Oh yes Barbara told me, so sad that he got hurt, but he's doing much better now,"

Toby heard the girls scurry up behind him.

“Do you know when they’ll be home from the hospital?”

“Didn’t Jim tell you?” Nana glanced at Phil, who took the hint and put the car into park before Nana turned and faced them again “They came home about two hours ago, but left for their spring break trip right away, Barbara and Jim won’t be back for about ten days,”

Toby actually felt his jaw drop open.

“B...But…” Claire stammered “Are they seriously going backpacking in Yosemite with Jim being all busted up?”

“I was surprised to, but Barbara said that Jim really didn’t want to miss their vacation, so they’re going to San Francisco and staying in a hotel instead,” the corners of Nana’s mouth tugged downwards into a frown, eyebrows drawing together “Did Jim not tell you any of this?”

Ok she had clearly picked up on the fact that things weren’t ‘Ok’ between Jim and them, and normally Toby would be trying to reassure Nana that everything really was cool, but right now he was too busy concentrating on not puking.

They were gone. For ten days. Ten whole days Jim and Dr. Lake would be gone.

Plenty of time for another 'animal attack'.

After an uncomfortably long silence Nana leaned back in her seat and redid her belt “I need to get to my cardiologist appointment now, but

we can talk more when I get back,”

With that she nodded at Phil, who looked incredibly uncomfortable, but restarted the car and pulled away, leaving the four of them alone in the cul de sac, with nothing to do but slowly pick up their bikes and trudge into Toby’s garage.

They’d screwed up. *He’d* screwed up. He’d screwed up so freaking bad. Yeah Jim was being a gigantic freaking hypocrite about the lying, but his mom locks him in the basement every other Tuesday. Of course the guy wasn’t acting rationally.

He could still see the terrified look on Jim’s face while they yelled at him yesterday crystal clear.

And just because Jim was being a hypocrite didn’t mean that it wasn’t a dick move to lie to him about calling CPS.

And what they did yesterday….

Toby swallowed back another wave of nausea. Just thinking about what he’d done was enough to make him sick, he wanted to go back in time and smack some sense into himself.

He’d let his anger win out over everything else and started firing back at Jim, and then the girls had followed his lead. Pushing Jim so far over the edge that he went and started a fight with Psycho Steve of all people, who put him in the freaking hospital. Now Dr. Lake had taken him out of town and he wasn’t answering his phone--

His train of thought flew off the rails and crashed to a halt.

Jim and Dr. Lake were gone, and wouldn't be back for over a week. Which meant that their house was going to be completely empty for that whole time.

Before the idea had even finished forming Toby knew what he had to do.

Immediately after propping his bike up against the wall Toby strode over to the toolbench and grabbed the items he was looking for. A doorstop, an unraveled wire coat hanger, and the biggest pair of bolt cutters Nana had been able to find at Home Depot.

Darci was the first to notice him "What are you doing with all that?"

"Snooping,"

Now Mary and Claire were looking at him to "What do you mean?"

"Jim and Dr. Lake are gone for spring break, and I think we all know that Jim is going to ignore any texts or messages we send. So I'm going straight to the source, I'm going into their house to get some real answers,"

The girls all shared an uncertain look "Toby…" Claire said slowly "You know that if you break in they won't be able to use anything you find as evidence, right?"

He wilted a little, but tightened his grip on the bolt cutters at the same time "I know, but this might be the only chance to find out what's

really happening to Jim. And if I can figure that out, maybe I can figure out how to get Jim to let us help him,"

Toby turned and then hesitated, dragging the toe of his shoe on the concrete "I won't ask you guys to come with me, but I need to do this,"

Knowing that if he waited any longer he was going to chicken out, Toby raised his foot and strode out of the garage, making a beeline for the Lake house. After a few seconds he heard footsteps behind him as the girls started to follow.

And even though he knew he'd do this alone if he had to, it felt really *really* good that he didn't have to.

Once he got to Jim's garage, Toby pulled a trash can up to the door and stood on it. Boosting him up high enough to wedge the door stop between the garage door and the frame, reaching in with the coathanger until he snagged the cord and pulled it down within arm's reach. Cord in hand, Toby yanked until he felt it give, allowing him to slide up the garage door with ease.

Stepping down and picking up the trash can, Toby turned to go put it back when he saw Claire, Darci, and Mary staring at him with big eyes.

"Toby…" Mary said slowly "How did you know how to do that?"

"Oh, uh…" he felt his face heat up "Nana showed me how when Meow Meow PI got locked in our garage, then she made me promise not to tell anyone….so please don't tell anyone,"

“We won’t but you are going to have to teach us that one,”

Once the trash can was back in place they headed in, Toby pulling the garage door shut behind them “Where should we start?” Darci whispered, even though it was only the four of them in the deserted house.

Toby glanced around, tool bench, picnic coolers, spare fridge, chest freezer-- He froze, eyes locked on the chest freezer pushed back against the far wall. The one that was always kept padlocked for reasons he’d never questioned until now. The only reason he could think of to keep a freezer locked would be--

He shoved the idea away before a picture could form in his head.

But now he *needed* to see for himself to make sure that the thought he was desperately trying not to think about wasn’t true.

“Here,” he strode over, and with only slightly shaking hands, cut the metal U of the latch off with two snaps of the bolt cutters, the unopened lock clattering to the floor. It was actually easier than he thought it would be, of course the bolt cutters were ginormous compared to the latch.

The girls gathered in close as he popped the now empty latch and slowly lifted the lid.

First off there weren’t any dead bodies staring back at them, so that was good. It looked like the freezer was just stuffed with regular plastic grocery packages. But why put a lock on ordinary food? Maybe they really were worried about racoons, those were a menace in this neighborhood.

Despite that perfectly rational, reasonable explanation, Toby couldn't shake the feeling that something looked off about the food in front of him, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

It only took a few more seconds of staring for him to figure it out. He didn't recognize any of the labels on these packages. And he and Jim had done a lot of grocery shopping together. Jim going on and on about all the subtle differences in flavor between different items and different brands.

That's how Toby knew with absolute certainty that this stuff wasn't anything you could buy at any grocery store in Arcadia Oaks. Because in all of their trips shopping together, they'd never bought any of the items in this freezer.

Reaching past him, Claire gingerly picked up something shrink wrapped in blue and yellow plastic "Beef sweetbreads?"

Toby eyed the package suspiciously "Bread doesn't come from beef,"

"Sweetbreads aren't bread, they're organ meat,"

"Ew,"

"Hey they're actually pretty good when you cook them right,"

Even more curious now, they all started reaching in and rifling through the frozen packages in front of them.

“It looks like this is just a bunch of meat,” Darci said while holding up a bag of beef bones by the corner between her thumb and forefinger.

Mary wrinkled her nose at a package of chicken livers “Yeah, but I’ve never seen Jim cook with any of this stuff,” she peered in Toby’s direction “Have you?”

His mouth went dry, nausea creeping back in “No, I haven’t,”

They kept digging, plastic packs of meat piling up on the floor around them, and the deeper they went the weirder things got. Eventually hitting what looked like whole small animals, cleaned and skinned and sealed in shrink wrap. Toby lifted one of them out, guts squirming in his belly “Guys, what are these?”

Claire leaned over and read off a tiny label on the corner of the package “It says whole rabbit,”

This kept getting freakier and freakier, Jim had *never* cooked rabbit meat before, let alone roasting them whole.

Darci and Mary cleared off the rest of the rabbits to uncover a massive package at the bottom, one that would have taken all four of them to lift out, bright red of raw muscle showing clearly against the white of the freezer. But unlike everything else in here, this one had clearly been opened and resealed multiple times, with chunks of meat taken off, proving that someone was taking stuff out of this freezer and using it on a regular basis

“This one says whole bison leg,” Darci said quietly.

A chill went through him, and not because he was standing in front of an open freezer.

"Oh my god, I just can't--" Mary darted away, running to the wall farthest away from the freezer and slumping against it, gasping and shaking. Claire immediately ran over and put an arm around her shoulders, leaving Toby and Darci standing in front of the freezer.

"Toby," Darci's voice was a monotone, her eyes locked on the frozen leg in front of them "Are you *absolutely* sure that Jim never cooked with any of this stuff,"

"Positive,"

"Then...what do they do with all this?"

Toby's stomach shrank in on itself "I don't know,"

Were they trying to bait racoons or something? It was the only thing Toby could think of, but if they were, why? And he was pretty sure there was a lot cheaper stuff out there they could use for racoon bait. But if they weren't using it as bait then what they hell were they doing with all this weird meat? And why the lock?

Pulling in a deep breath through her nose, Darci slowly started putting the packages they'd taken out back in the freezer "Ok, we're not going to find anything else out here, we need to clean up and keep looking,"

Fighting past the painful tightness in his abdomen, Toby grabbed a

rabbit and joined her. Claire eventually came over to help them, but Mary stayed far away until the lid of the freezer was shut.

“Um, Toby…” she said, walking back up to join them “How are we going to put the lock back on when you cut it off?”

“Easy,” he walked over to the toolbench and picked up a small bottle “Instant set Gorilla glue,”

And with two quick dabs of glue and Mary holding the pieces for him, the lock and the latch looked nearly as good as new. The latch did look a little funky from where the cutters had gone through, but Toby was pretty sure Jim and Dr. Lake wouldn’t notice it.

Now time to search the rest of the house.

Toby headed through the side door into the main house with the girls just behind him, pausing just inside the hall while he tried to figure out the best place to search first.

“Let’s look in Dr. Lake’s bedroom,”

All three of them slowly turned towards Mary.

“I mean…” her cheeks filled with red “If she’s hiding something chances are it would be in there,”

Claire nodded at that “You’re right, let’s go,”

The girls headed towards the stairs, but Toby hung back. Darci paused at the foot of the stairs, glancing back at him “Everything ok Toby?”

Even knowing what he knew, about the basement and the scars and all the other strange stuff. There was a part of him that still thought of Dr. Lake as….Dr. Lake. His friend’s fun, sometimes goofy mom, the one that took them to theme parks and gave the best presents on birthdays and holidays, who was never too busy to talk and always happy to see him. Going into her room and snooping through all her stuff felt...wrong.

All the girls were looking at him now, seeing what the hold up was.

Toby clenched his jaw and raised his head.

But no matter how bad he felt about it Toby couldn’t let his guilty conscience get in the way. Dr. Lake….Dr. Lake wasn’t who he thought she was, and Jim was in real trouble. This was the only way he could help him. That meant he had to suck it up and follow through.

He’d come this far already.

“Y-- yeah I’m fine, let’s go,” Toby forced his feet to move and followed them up the stairs into the back bedroom. His throat tightening when he saw Mary dive straight into going through her dresser, even as he set aside his tools and got down on his knees to join her.

They spent nearly two hours going through the room from top to bottom. Searching the closet, every drawer in the dresser, under the bed and in the nightstand, every single nook and cranny in the room, even under the mattress. But they didn’t find anything. Just clothes,

jewelry, and books.

Toby glumly replaced the socks back in the drawer he pulled them out of. If there was anything hidden in the house it wasn't in here. So all they'd managed to accomplish was violating Dr. Lake's privacy. But if there wasn't anything in her bedroom then where else would--

"Toby," Claire spoke up, startling him "Do you know if this house has a crawlspace, or an attic?"

He paused with his hand halfway out of the sock drawer. The Lakes had both a crawlspace and an attic. He'd seen the crawlspace, a small cubby in the basement full of their Christmas decorations, but the attic--

Dr. Lake had only mentioned once that they did have an unfinished attic, even shown him where it was.

And then said that he should never *ever* go up there.

"Their crawlspace is full of Christmas decorations, but I've never seen inside the attic. Dr. Lake said it was off limits,"

That got the girls' attention.

Mary got to her feet "Where is it?"

"Closet, in the ceiling,"

Immediately they all made a beeline towards the closet, Mary pulling open the doors and revealing the square cut out of the plaster in the ceiling.

Claire frowned “How is one of us supposed to get up there?”

“I’ll do it guys,” Darci stepped forward, shoulders square and mouth set in a firm line “I’m the tallest, just give me a boost,”

Positioning themselves directly under the hole, Mary and Claire each grabbed one of Darci’s legs and lifted, allowing Darci to push aside the cut out square of ceiling and poke her head into the darkness of the attic beyond.

“A little higher guys, I need to get a good grip to pull myself up,”

Claire and Mary obliged, raising Darci until she was waist deep in the attic, allowing her to kick off from the palms of their hands and vanish into the dark hole. After a few seconds Toby saw a small light, which had to be from Darci’s cellphone, blink on, illuminating the bare wooden beams of the unfinished space.

“You see anything Darc?” Mary called up at her.

The light bobbed around in the small space above them, ceiling creaking under her as Darci moved around “Nothing so far, there’s a lot of fiberglass insulation so I have to be careful not to…”

All of a sudden the creaks stopped, the light staying frozen in one

spot.

“Darci,” Toby forced the strangled word out “What’s going on?”

Things were silent for a few more seconds before they heard her voice again “There’s a box here guys, and it doesn’t look like Christmas decorations,”

With some tricky maneuvering, Darci managed to push the box down the hole, where Toby and Claire caught it. Quickly moving it off to the side so the three of them could catch Darci as she jumped down. Once she managed to untangle herself from them they all turned their attention back to the box.

Toby pushed it out of the closet so there was enough room for all of them to huddle around it. The box was about the size of a microwave, dark metal and surprisingly heavy for its size. It looked like one of those heavy duty water/fire/apocalypse proof boxes, and fortunately it wasn’t locked, meaning they wouldn’t need the bolt cutters. Trembling, terrified of what he might find, Toby popped the latches and lifted the lid.

Part of him was worried that when they opened it they wouldn’t find anything but boring adult papers, bills and insurance stuff like that, but one look and he knew that wasn’t going to be the case.

Inside were two black bags, a large plastic one and a small felt one, and some kind of weird plastic rectangle. Mary reached in and pulled out the small bag first.

They all watched her tug the drawstrings open, not even daring to breathe as she turned the bag over and dumped the contents out.

A bunch of loose teeth and a bundle of black hair in a rubber band tumbled onto her hand.

Just when Toby thought this couldn't get any more confusing "What the hell is all that?"

Claire poked at one of the teeth sitting in Mary's palm "This looks like stuff from an animal,"

It certainly did. That hair could easily be fur, and those teeth would have been right at home on a bear's mouth. Big and sharp and clearly from a meat eater.

A locked freezer full of strange meat, animal parts hidden away in the attic. Toby still couldn't put the pieces together, but it wasn't shaping up to be anything good.

They spent a good minute staring at them before Mary poured the teeth and hair back in the bag "We aren't going to learning anything by staring at teeth, let's keep going,"

Claire grabbed the large bag just as Mary was replacing the small one, setting it in front of her and untying the straps to peer down inside.

Toby crawled closer "What is it? What's in there?"

"It looks like...bath bombs,"

“What? No way,” Darci scooted up to Claire’s side and glanced down at the open bag “Huh, it does look like bath bombs,”

It took Toby a few seconds to realize they weren’t talking about actual explosives “Bath bombs,” he said incredulously “You mean like those fizzy scented things you put in the tub, those kind of bath bombs?”

Claire got to her feet “Only one way to be sure, follow me guys,,”

They tailed after Claire down the hall into the bathroom, where she promptly started filling the tub. Once there was about a half a foot of water inside she reached into the bag, pulled out a grainy pink ball, and dropped it in the water.

As they gathered in close and watched, a cloud of pink bubbles fizzed up around the sphere, filling the tub with pink foam and the scent of--

“Huh,” Toby sniffed “Roses,”

Mary reached a hand into the water, swirling it around before emerging slightly pink “It looks like they are just bath bombs,”

Ok this was getting really weird. Bath Bombs and animal parts weren’t exactly criminal, but what were they doing locked up in a secret attic box?

For a long time Toby had thought that the curfew and the locking in the basement was because of what Nana told him. That Dr. Lake was so scared of losing Jim she’d started doing some messed up things in order to keep him.

But after learning about the scars he started wondering if that was actually true. And now after seeing the meat and the animal parts and the bath bombs…

It was starting to look like all of this was just scratching the surface of something a lot bigger.

And there was still one more thing to check out.

After draining and rinsing the tub, they all went back to the bedroom and gathered around the box again, where Toby picked up the final item inside it, the plastic rectangle.

He turned it over a few times, trying to figure out exactly what it was when it clicked, filling him with a jolt of exhilaration.

“Guys I think this is some kind of book,”

Books meant data, information. Maybe even the answers behind the bath bombs, teeth, and weird meat.

Mary kneeled down next to him “Can you get it open?”

“I’m trying, but there’s a combination lock, and the thing’s completely sealed so I can’t just bust it open with the bolt cutters without destroying it, and--”

They all jumped as a deafening chime rang through the house.

The doorbell.

Toby's heart shot up into his throat like lightning, beating hummingbird fast as the bell kept ringing again and again.

Hearing the sound shattered his focus like a harsh slap, forcing Toby to remember exactly where he was and what he was doing.

He was in someone else's house.

They'd come in without permission by breaking into the garage.

They were *breaking and entering* .

They were committing a crime.

If they got caught it wouldn't be extra homework or detention they had to deal with.

If they got caught they would get in *real* trouble.

For the first time Toby knew he wasn't being melodramatic when he imagined getting arrested and sent to juvie.

Toby shot his head up and saw that the girls had the exact same panicked, horror-stricken looks on their faces that he knew he had on his. From down below the doorbell kept ringing again and again.

The locked book slipped from his hands and fell to the carpet with a dull thunk.

Oh *fuck* .

"*Guys we need to get out of here now!*"

They all simultaneously jumped to their feet, Claire practically throwing the bag of bath bombs back in the box, and after fumbling with it for a few seconds Toby managed to toss the book in after it, Darci slamming the lid shut while muttering 'oh god' over and over again.

Frantically dragging the box back towards the closet, they figured out really fast that getting the box up was going to be a lot harder than getting it down, especially considering they were all freaking out. After running around like idiots for a few seconds, they got it together enough to hoist Darci up to the attic again, and then raise the box to where she could grab it and put it back, before dropping down from the attic herself.

Meanwhile the doorbell continued to ring over and over, each chime practically giving Toby a heart attack, as they raced around the room, replacing items and shutting drawers and removing every trace of their snooping.

"Claire what the hell are you doing!?" Mary hissed.

Toby glanced over to see Claire standing in the doorway staring down the stairs to where the front door was “C’mon Claire we have to hoof it before Jim and Dr. Lake come in!”

“But...why would Jim and Dr. Lake be ringing the doorbell of their own house?”

Toby, Mary, and Darci all stopped dead

Claire was right, if Jim and Dr. Lake were back they’d just come right in without even touching the doorbell. But then who was ringing it? If it was just a salesman or something wouldn’t they leave as soon as they figured out no one was home? Whoever this was had been ringing the doorbell for nearly five minutes with no sign of stopping.

“New plan!” Mary piped up, voice a full octave higher than normal “Sneak out the back, then circle around through the bushes, act like we’re just out walking and see who it is,”

Toby nodded shakily along with Claire and Darci, leave it to Mary to come up with a plan under extreme pressure.

After double checking and making sure they’d gotten rid of all evidence of their break in, Toby grabbed his tools and ran to the stairs “Quick guys, go go go!”

Not wasting a second the girls scampered down the stairs on light feet, Toby following after, the unrelenting doorbell even louder on the first floor.

They made a beeline for the back door, Toby going out last and

locking it behind them. Following them, he ran over to the fence and, in a feat only possible to the insane amount of adrenaline shooting through his veins, hopped it in two bounds and dove into the shrubbery, joining the girls.

“Everyone ok?” Darci whispered, crouching low in the undergrowth.

“Yeah,”

“Uh huh,”

“Yep,”

It was all Toby could do not to collapse, gasping for breath and quivering all over from equal parts relief and leftover panic.

They’d gotten away with it. He was pretty sure they’d gotten away with it. No one had seen them and they hadn’t left any evidence behind. Although they hadn’t had time to wipe their fingerprints off of everything, or get rid of their DNA, hopefully Jim and Dr. Lake wouldn’t realize that their house was broken into at all. And even if they did there was no reason for the four of them to be suspects.

They were fine. No one was going to get arrested.

Although now that the adrenaline was starting to fade, Toby was pretty sure he was going to have some wicked bruises from his landing.

Mary sank lower the the ground, perched on her hands and knees "Keep to the plan guys, let's sneak around to the other side,"

They all followed her lead, Toby forcing his breathing to slow and become quieter, crawling through the bushes until they emerged on the sidewalk around the corner. Standing and shaking off the leaves and branches, Toby tucking the cutters, hanger, and stopper in a bush to retrieve later.

"Let's go," Mary took the first steps towards Jim's house. A few months ago Toby would have thought she was completely relaxed about the whole thing, but now he could see just how on edge she was.

Toby walked after her, along with Claire and Darci, trying to be as casual as humanly possible without completely overdoing it.

Nothing to see here. Just a group of teens out walking around, as teens did. No criminals here.

He had to try especially hard to act normal as they were heading around the corner of the block, breath catching in his chest as Jim's house, and the mysterious bell ringer came into sight.

It was some scruffy looking guy, messy looking beard and jeans and a jacket that had certainly seen better days. Not a particularly scary looking guy, but it certainly didn't look like he was there to sell anything.

Feeling bolder now that they were out in broad daylight and not at risk of being caught mid-felony, Toby came right up to where the front steps met the sidewalk, the girls stepping up next to him, with scruffy standing less than ten feet away. Fidgeting and pressing the

bell every ten seconds or so, face crimped in frustration.

Of course this close they should have realized it was inevitable that the mysterious scruffy man was going to notice them.

“Oh hey!” he jogged across the porch towards them, causing them all to shuffle backwards involuntarily “You kids know the people who live here?”

“Why do you want to know?” Mary said warily

“Oh-- I heard from my buddy that CPS has been sniffing around, and Barb took Jim out of the hospital without checking him out yesterday, so I’m trying to see if they’re ok,”

Instantly uneasy, Toby glanced over at the girls, the three of them looking just as tense as he felt. The whole leaving the hospital without being checked out was news to him and definitely not good. But even more alarming was the fact that although this guy apparently knew Jim and Dr. Lake, Toby had no idea who he was. And by the looks of it, neither did Darci, Claire, or Mary.

“So do any of you know when they’ll be back?”

Claire took half a step forward “Sorry but...who are you again?”

“Oh! Well I…” scruffy trailed off, letting out a gusty breath and running hand through his hair “You see I’m--” all of a sudden he cut off and looked over at them sharply, Toby flinching as the man locked eyes with him.

“Toby! Come on, you know me, right bud?”

His heart stopped, blood running cold. From the corners of his vision he could see the girls pull around him protectively “Who are you, how do you know my name?”

“Come on,” the man grinned, as if they were all old buddies “You know me, from back when I used to live here,”

Toby just kept staring at him blankly. Used to live here? The only person he could think of that used to live here was--

No. It couldn’t be.

He looked at him again, *really* looked, comparing the shape of the jaw, the scraggly beard to the ones from his murky, half faded memories.

“Hang on,” Toby slowly raised a finger to point at the stranger who might not be a stranger “You mean that you’re--”

“That’s right,” he flashed them a smile, painfully familiar now that he could see the resemblance “I’m Jim’s dad,”

Chapter End Notes

> Alright now he's made his first onscreen appearance I can finally add James Lake Sr to the character tags. Will his arrival be plot relevant? You'd better believe it. Something to keep in mind, James left shortly before Jim took a dip in the bath bomb of doom, so he has no idea about Jim's transformations.

Mary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mary hopped from foot to foot on the sidewalk as the final bell droned in her ears, buzzing with nervous energy that had nowhere to go. There was no way she was making it to first period on time; but right now that was the least of her worries.

Motion on the street caught her attention. Someone coming around the corner on their bike and heading towards the school. Her heart skipping a beat as they got close enough to recognize.

It was Jim.

Mary went noodle limp on her feet, letting out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. It wasn't like she didn't hadn't believed Toby when he'd told them, but she needed to see for herself.

Jim had come back from his vacation, safe and sound. And there he was, biking up to school like any other day. Mission accomplished, now she should head inside and try to salvage what she could of first period. Because Jim was almost certainly pissed as hell and definitely not interested in talking.

Despite knowing all that Mary found herself heading towards him.

She wasn't quite able to keep from wincing as she came up to the bike rack Jim was parking at. Even over a week later his face was still pretty banged up.

“Jim!”

He didn’t react in the slightest, locking in his bike and moving to head into the school.

Mary darted around and blocked him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry we called CPS on your mom, I’m sorry I lied about the photos, and I’m sorry we all ganged up on you the way we did,”

Jim looked up and briefly met her eyes, expression completely flat. Then he stepped around her and kept walking like she wasn’t there.

Pins and nails studded her stomach “Jim wait! We need to talk! I mean…can you talk? I know your jaw got messed up pretty ba--”

He stopped in his tracks and pivoted around “I can talk just fine, but what’s there to talk about? You want to know what it’s like to have to take all your meals through a straw? Let me tell you it’s gross. You want to talk about how my mom almost lost her job, and now she’s on probation and has to take parenting classes? But you probably already knew all that, thanks to the school and the hospital gossiping basically everyone in town knows,”

Mary couldn’t move, intestines tangling into knots. He was right, she did know about that, for all the reasons he’d said, but that wasn’t why her guts were in a pretzel.

It would have been one thing if Jim was angry, she’d expected anger, prepared herself for it. But Jim didn’t sound mad he sounded…empty.

Like he was just reading off a script without even caring about what he was saying, not even bothering to put any emotion behind the words.

Last night she'd come up with a whole list of ways to try to get through to Jim, from shameless begging to outright bribery, but now hearing Jim sound so hollow….

She couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"And thanks to you guys CPS is going to do weekly visits from now on, plus surprise visits when we aren't expecting them. And they only agreed to let me and mom go on vacation because I promised to video call every day. You want to talk about that?"

Jim looked at her, his eyes vacant in a way that chilled her to the bone more than any amount of anger could.

"Because if that's what you want to talk about, then we have nothing to say,"

Mary just stood there completely frozen, her blood turning slowly to ice as she realized just how bad this was.

He stepped around her and continued moving towards the school. Seeing him walking away sent a bolt of panic through her that managed to unfreeze Mary's throat "W-- wait! There's...something else you should know,"

Jim paused midstep, a tiny spark of hope flickering to life in her chest.

“Your…..your dad’s back in town,”

For a few seconds they stood there in silence.

“Yeah,” Jim muttered “I know, Nana called and told us when we were on our way back,”

Then without even turning around he walked away, door slamming shut behind him. The glimmer of hope snuffed out in an instant, leaving her just as cold and empty as she'd been a moment ago.

Mary must have stood there like an idiot for a full minute before forcing her legs to move, feet feeling like lead, and carry her into the school.

This was bad. This was bad. This was so *freaking* bad.

They never should have lied to Jim about going to CPS, she’d just been so afraid of him freezing them all out again.

Of course Jim eventually finding out and cutting them all off was probably inevitable, but if they’d been honest from the start then maybe Jim wouldn’t have ended up in the freaking *hospital*.

Her guts gave another painful twist.

And they *really* shouldn’t have blown up on him when he confronted

them about it.

With everything weighing on her Mary couldn't bring herself to care enough to even try and make it to first period, opting instead to continue wandering aimlessly down the hall.

Trying to make Jim come forward had been the opposite of helpful, and going behind his back had backfired spectacularly. What she needed was to think outside the box. Figure out what would actually help and come up with a new gameplan. A compromise.

Mary jerked her head to get rid of the thought.

No. It was like Mo always said; a good compromise was less than what both people were after and made everyone unhappy. What was better was to collaborate. Figure out what everyone involved wanted and create a solution that would make them all happy.

That thought comforting her more than anything else, Mary slowed down her pace to a trot, pulling out her phone to jot down ideas.

First things first, what did people want? Mary knew what the four of them all wanted, for Jim to be safe from his mom, and Jim wanted….

She slowed to a stop, thumbs perched in a ready position over the screen.

What did Jim want?

Mary tapped her foot on the ground, fingers fluttering around her phone.

What Jim *should* want is to be free from his mom. To not be locked in the house or the basement all the time, to not have to deal with all the other crazy bullshit his mom probably put him through.

Those marks were made with a scalpel, no buts about it.

Her fingers curled tighter around her phone until she had it in a death grip.

So why did he keep defending her? Why couldn't Jim just realize how messed up all that stuff his mom did really wa--

Mary paused midword in her typing, fingertips hovering over the screen for a few seconds while she chewed on her lip, then slowly going back to delete the last few lines she typed.

She couldn't fall into that trap again, Jim wasn't thinking rationally. And of course he wasn't, you don't get locked in a basement by your mom for years without it screwing with your head. They could worry about getting Jim's head on straight later. Right now the most important thing was getting him out from under his psycho mom. And to do that Mary need to figure out what it was that Jim *really* wanted deep down and find a way to--

"Hey you're one of Jim's friends, right?"

Mary just about jumped out of her skin, snapping her head around so fast it nearly gave her whiplash.

“ *Wha -- how --*”

“Can you tell me what class he’s in right now?” James gave her a flimsy smile “I need to talk to him,”

After a few seconds of jumbled stuttering she finally got her voice to catch up to her brain.

“wha-- what the hell are you doing here!?”

“I’m here to see my son,”

“No-- I-- we’re at *school!* ”

He glanced around “You know what class Jim’s in right now?”

All she could do was stare at him with her mouth hanging open.

Mary knew for a damn fact that if her moms had to fill out two separate forms, wear visitors name tags, and have the receptionist walk them to her classroom just to pick her up early one day, then this guy definitely shouldn’t just be wandering around. Add on the fact that he had never been Jim’s dad in any sense of the word that mattered and the whole thing was extra shady. Seriously, how had he even gotten in the building? Weren’t there locks and cameras and security guards to prevent exactly this kind of thing from happening?

“Look I just need to talk to Jim, Barb hasn’t been returning any of my calls, if I can just get to Jim, he can convince her to hear me out,”

“I can’t do that!”

“Please,” he clasped his hands together, face pleading “I miss him and Barbara so much,”

The look he gave her would have been cute on a puppy, and maybe one of her baby cousins would have been able to pull it off, but something about seeing it on a guy old enough to be her dad pissed her right off.

“Yeah, no way. How about you go back to wherever you left to and stay for another ten years,”

That got a flinch out of him “Ok, I know I messed up really bad, I had a great wife and kid and I threw it all away, but I’m ready to do whatever it takes to make it up to them,”

If her jaw wasn’t on the floor before it certainly was now. Was this guy just BSing her or did he actually believe the crap coming out of his mouth? There was no way after just being back in town for a week he had even half a clue what was really going on with Jim; and he expected just to show up and play happy family?

Even Mary was doing an arguably better job of being there for Jim than him, and she was screwing up left and right.

And having two moms with one of them being trans, Mary had learned pretty early on that just sharing genes with someone did *not*

make them family.

" *Look* ," she spat through clenched teeth "You know CPS is looking at Jim and his mom, right?"

"Yeah, that's why I came,"

"So did it ever occur to you that with all the stuff Jim has going on you showing up out of nowhere and butting into things isn't helping *anything* ?"

James just blinked at her with that stupid confused look on his face "He's my son, all I want to do is help him,"

One of her eyebrows twitched "You ditched them ten years ago, Jim doesn't even know you,"

"He's still my son,"

Mary's hands squeezed into fists at her sides, jaw clenched as she fought to keep from completely blowing up at this guy.

Was he completely incapable of taking a freaking hint or was he just that dense? Whatever, regardless of whether or not he was actually stupid he was certainly acting that way. And like Nainai always said, there's no point in arguing with stupid.

"Even if you did find Jim, you think his teacher's going to stop the whole class just so you can have a touching family reunion?"

Finally she could see the lightbulb go off in his head, James' face falling as he realized that his 'plan' had a gigantic gaping flaw. It actually had quite a few of those, but Mary would take what she could get.

James looked absolutely crushed, and for a moment Mary hoped that he'd give up and leave, then suddenly he perked back up "I know, maybe you could talk to him for me,"

She went rigid.

What was that now?

Meanwhile James kept yammering on at her.

"Yeah, you can talk to Jim," he stepped closer, causing Mary to take an involuntary step back "You can tell him about why I'm here, convince him to get his mom to call me back, wha do ya say?"

"N-- no!"

Forget stupid, this guy was full on crazy.

"Don't worry, It'll be easy, I'll tell you exactly what to say,"

He got even closer, Mary's shoulders hit the lockers,. Flickering her gaze from side to side, heartbeat skyrocketing when she saw that they

were completely alone in the hallway. It was the middle of the period, there wasn't going to be anyone else in the halls for nearly an hour.

Would anyone even hear her if she screamed?

"Please I really need your help, my family's in trouble. I have to get Barb to let me come home so I can fix things, and I can't do that without your help,"

Mary was breathing hard and fast but she still couldn't get enough air, fighting to keep the stammer out of her voice "Solve your family problems yourself, I'm not helping you butt in,"

James got even closer, close enough that she could smell his cheap cologne "C'mon you gotta help me please, I have to tell them how sorry I am and make all this right,"

Mary squirmed against the lockers, she was out of room to retreat, and it looked like James wasn't going to take no for an answer. But even if she was on speaking terms with Jim right now, and she most certainly was not, there was no way she was helping this weirdo get anywhere near him.

She could hear the blood rushing in her ears, James just a foot away from her now, still babbling on and begging her to help him.

The question was how long did she have before he stopped asking nicely?

Mary struggled to think of a way out of this while her instincts kept screaming at her to run, even though she knew James would catch her

in half a second.

How had they gotten him to leave them alone last week?

Mary’s chest was tight, heart and lungs competing for space inside her ribcage.

They hadn’t, eventually they’d just run across the street and locked themselves in Toby’s house until he'd left.

She felt a sharp pain along her spine, a metal lock digging between her shoulder blades as she tried to back up even further. Their faces were only inches apart now, she could smell the mouthwash on his breath and count the individual hairs in his beard.

Her heart pounding so loud she wondered if he could hear it.

Maybe if she pretended to agree to talk to Jim she could lead him away, try to give him the slip. But what if he figured out she was giving him the runaround, what if he got angry, it was just the two of them alone in the hallway, what if he tried to--

From out of nowhere a blur flew in front of her and knocked James to the ground, grunting as he hit the linoleum.

Señor Uhl propped himself up on top of him, knee between James’ shoulders and both wrists in his hands, and looked sharply towards her “Are you alright Miss Wang?”

“Yeah-- I-- I’m,” Mary let out a shaky breath “I’m fine,”

She was feeling a lot of things right now but couldn’t say exactly what. Mostly she was just relieved that there was a bigger, more familiar adult between her and James.

The relief was short lived as she was caught off guard by an arm suddenly wrapping itself around her shoulders, letting out a sharp squeak and going board stiff.

“It’s alright now dear,” Ms. Janeth cooed “You’re safe,”

It was just Ms Janeth, hugging her. Getting a hug from a teacher was really *really* weird, but she felt even better now that the adult ratio was two to one.

“You kids have the fucking Terminator teaching at your school!?” James wheezed out.

Uhl scowled down at him, free hand going to unfasten his tie “You are trespassing on school property,” he swiftly bound both of James wrists with the loose tie “I am going to *escort* you to the front office where we will wait for the police to arrive,”

“Aw come on! I have a right to see my son,” Uhl hauled James to his feet, frantically glancing around, eyes landing on Mary “C’mon kid, you can vouch for me,”

Ms. Janeth swiftly turned and pushed Mary ahead of her down the hall, James’s protests fading into the distance as she marched her along at a brisk pace “Let’s go to the teachers lounge where you can

relax for a bit,”

All Mary could do was nod along and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Her muscles were jello, trembling all over, insides hot and quivering. If it wasn’t for Ms. Janeth’s grip on her shoulders Mary would have melted into a puddle right then and there.

As they made their way down the hall the adrenaline slowly flowed away, heartbeat and breathing returning to their regular pace. But as the panic faded, fury was quickly taking its place.

Who the hell did that creep think he *was!?* Showing up where he wasn’t allowed to be, barging in and making demands when he had no right to. Only thinking about what *he* wanted without...even….

The world around her slowed to a stop, her steps faltering, ceasing for a full ten seconds before Ms Janeth gave her a gentle tug and pulled her along.

Was this how Jim felt when they’d first confronted him back in January?

Cornering him out of the blue, piling on accusations and demanding answers, trying to strong arm him into doing things their way--

The realization hit like a punch to the gut.

Oh my god it totally *was* .

Heat rapidly filled her cheeks, spreading out over the rest of her skin until she was burning from head to toe.

Had Jim felt this trapped, this scared? How could she have done this to him without even realizing it? How could she have done this to one of her fr--

Ms. Janeth pushed open the door and led her inside the lounge “Have a seat, nice and easy,” she guided her into one of the chairs “Now let me get you a ginger ale,”

Mary still had enough of her brain working to nod numbly in response, Ms. Janeth nodding back and turning towards the fridge.

No wonder Jim hadn’t come to them for help, no wonder he’d clammed up and run off, if he felt even half as panicked and pinned down as she had just a minute ago--

Not to mention they’d followed their colossal fuck up in January by going to CPS and immediately lying about it. Making him feel secure again just long enough for it to get ripped away.

Suddenly him freezing them all out made a lot more sense.

And Jim hadn’t even confronted them right away, he’d been so afraid that it had taken him nearly a month. Then when he finally got the courage to confront them, they’d turned it around on him and….

Holy *shit* they'd screwed up. And she was only just starting to realize how bad.

Bullying him to come forward, not cool. Lying about calling CPS, way not cool. Flipping the tables on him when he called them out on it, *definitely* not cool. Calling CPS in the first place….

Mary's teeth dug into her bottom lip as she peered down at the plastic table in front of her.

That was the one thing in all of this she didn't actually regret. Dr Lake had been locking Jim in the basement since he was little, Mary knew that for an absolute fact. And with his ankle scars and all the weird meat locked up in his freezer, there was probably a lot more messed up crap going on that she didn't know about.

It was only a matter of time before Jim's mom seriously hurt him, and she couldn't just stand by and do nothing.

But what Mary still didn't understand was why Jim was so dead set on protecting his mom. Even going so far as to outright lie for her, but maybe….

She tried to imagine it the other way around, someone coming at her accusing Mom or Mo of being terrible evil parents.

Red hot rage instantly shot through her. Unforgivable, inexcusable, Mom and Mo might not be perfect but they were her moms and they loved her with all their--

Things are rarely all bad all the time, most often there's just enough good

to keep the victim coming back.

A lead weight dropped into the pit of her abdomen.

Dr. Lake may be hurting Jim, but she was still his *mom* . Yeah she locked him up all the time, but she probably also baked cookies for him, and read him bedtime stories. Of course he wouldn't be ok with turning on her, of course he didn't want to see her go to jail.

And the fact that his supposedly 'Perfect' mom locked him in the basement and slashed up his ankle….

That couldn't be easy to admit, much less have thrown in your face without any warning.

Mary slowly raised her phone again, her fingers were still trembling, but not so badly that she couldn't type.

Now that she had a better understanding of what exactly they did wrong, she needed to use it to come up with a solution.

One that wouldn't scare Jim off.

If they wanted Jim to trust them enough to let them help him then they needed to make sure he felt *safe* around them. Not trapped and cornered.

That meant no pushing, no pressure, none of that crap.

“Here you are dear,”

Mary started when Ms. Janeth set the can of ginger ale down in front of her, managing a weak smile as she accepted the can and Ms. Janeth took a seat across from her, before glancing back down at her phone and the notes she’d taken.

Under any other circumstances she’d give Jim as much space and time as he needed to feel safe again….but right now time was a luxury they couldn’t afford.

Based on what Toby had said, James leaving his family high and dry was what made Dr. Lake go crazy on Jim in the first place. And now that he was back in town…

Mary had gotten major creep vibes from that guy back when they first saw him hanging outside Jim’s house. And after the last ten minutes those vibes had been dialed up to eleven and the knob broken off. Best case scenario, James was a moron that was going to keep trying to shove himself into Jim’s life regardless of what anyone else said or did.

And if having her husband ditch her was what made Dr. Lake snap, him coming back and trying to claw his way into her life might just push her all the way off the deep end.

The chill in her blood came back with a vengeance, typing out the very rough beginnings of a plan with fingers that were shaking for reasons that had nothing to do with her encounter with the deadbeat creep.

Pushing him wasn't an option, but they *needed* to get Jim away from his mom before it was too late, and they didn't have very much time to do it.

If James was willing to break into the school to try and weasel his way back into his family, it wouldn't be long until he pushed things too far and sent Dr. Lake right over the edge.

And when that happened Jim would be the one who suffered.

Chapter End Notes

> Mary, and the other kids, may have inadvertently made the situation with Jim ten times worse through their multiple ham-fisted attempts to "help", but the important thing to remember is that they are still kids and this is literally the first time they have to deal with this kind of situation. They are still very much learning how to handle it when they learn that someone they know has (what they believe to be) an abusive homelife. They lack the patience and knowledge that come with experience and in their eagerness to try and help unintentionally made things worse.
>
> But they learn from their mistakes. And now that Mary's gotten a little more experience and some advice from knowledgeable adults in her life, she's finally starting to learn the importance of respecting boundaries even in a high stress situation like this, and will discuss and share what she's learned with Toby, Darci, and Claire.
>
> Now James Sr on the other hand is an adult who not only broke into school to try and see his son, but he did so with the goal of using his child to pressure his ex-wife into communicating with him. And when that failed he cornered a teenage girl and tried to coerce her into doing it for him. James doesn't have the excuse of youth or inexperience, he is a grown man who should know better.

Jim and Darci

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: Self Loathing, Implications of Depression, Discussions of domestic violence ending in murder suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"...so there's a lot that's still up in the air right now, but I think I should be able to clear the trip to Massachusetts with Dorrie and the other investigators,"

Barbara leaned forward, angling closer even with the table between them "How...how are you feeling about all this?"

"It's...a lot to take in,"

While that was certainly true, it wasn't the whole truth so to speak. When his mom had sat him down for an 'Important Talk' and then started going on about this theory she had about Salem and witches and the person who'd owned the bath bomb in the first place, it was so bizarre and out of nowhere it almost felt like he was listening to a weird play, not something that had to do with his real life.

Maybe later Jim would be shocked at everything his mom had unloaded on him, but right now he was just numb.

Of course that was nothing new.

Barbara winced and netted her fingers in front of her "I know this is a lot to spring on you all at once, and I'm sorry I kept quiet about this for as long as I did, I just….I just didn't want to get your hopes up for no reason,"

“It’s ok, not like I haven’t done the same to you,”

He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, hurt flashing in her eyes.

“I know you’ve been through a lot, especially in these past few months,” she said softly “But-- and even if we don’t find anything in Salem, this is all going to work out ok, I promise,”

Jim didn’t respond, and what was there to say really?

He wondered if she was saying that to him or herself.

Back when CPS started investigating them Jim didn’t think his life could get any worse.

Oh how wrong he was.

So much had gone to hell in such a short period of time; having a full on freakout at school, CPS breathing down their necks, permanently cutting things off with….with….

Jim’s throat tightened.

His whole life was just so bleak now. Nothing to work towards, nothing to look forward to. Just endless days of monotony tainted by the constant fear.

Just thinking about it made him feel like he was suffocating.

He was just so *so* tired. Tired of pretending everything was normal, of trying to hold everything together while it all fell apart around him. Jim had been fighting so hard for so long he just didn't think he could do it anymore.

And deep down he knew he'd given up on the thought that things could ever get better.

Lately Jim had been thinking more and more about what it would be like to just stop trying, stop putting in the effort to drag himself to school and get things done. Just go down to the basement and curl up with his old punching bag and wait for someone to come take him away, because after everything that had happened that seemed inevitable now.

But every time Jim came dangerously close to seriously considering that, he remembered his mom.

And what losing him would do to her.

Fidgeting, Barbara drummed her fingers against the table before abruptly standing up "You want to come to the store with me?"

Going to the store sounded exhausting right now, all Jim really wanted to do was lie down and take a nap. But he'd already spent all of yesterday laying around the house doing nothing, and the day before that and the day before that. Honestly all he felt like doing nowadays was sleeping. Jim still made sure to finish all his chores and homework, because no matter how tired he was those things *needed* to

get done, but nowadays they exhausted him so much that each task required an hour of recovery time, at the least.

He should force himself to go do something outside the house so his mom didn't get too worried. Besides, she wasn't used to going shopping by herself, she needed help picking out good produce.

An image of her standing over the orange bin flashed in his mind, forehead wrinkled and bottom lip caught under her teeth as she tried so hard to pick out the best ones.

Jim couldn't let himself quit now, they'd lost so much already; their peace of mind, Barbara's reputation, his fr--

The heat from his throat surged up behind his eyes, Jim blinked rapidly before it could turn into anything more.

His friends.

He wasn't sure what all his exact feelings about them were, but there were a *lot* of them.

For sure there was plenty of anger; Toby, Mary, Darci, and Claire had all played a part in bringing CPS to their door and throwing their lives under a microscope, putting Jim's transformation at more risk for exposure than ever before, all behind his back.

But….that wasn't the whole truth.

They'd tried coming to him first, but he'd been so caught off guard that he hadn't even tried explaining anything, he'd just run, and that must have scared them even more. And that's why they'd called CPS, not to cause problems, not to hurt his mom, because they were scared. All they wanted to do was help.

Thinking about the things the four of them had said about his mom still filled him with rage, made Jim want to scream at them about just how *wrong* they were and how *they* were the ones causing him problems and putting him in danger, he knew it wasn't completely their fault.

Claire, Toby, Darci, and Mary had a lot of the facts completely dead wrong; but one thing they were right about was that Jim lied to them, and had been lying to them for a very long time.

He'd been deceiving them for so long, stacking lies on top of lies on top of lies, that, even without them seeing the monster he really was, when the sparks started flying, everything between them had gone up in flames.

Burning emotion swelled, painful stinging prickling behind his eyes.

But even after all that, all the messed up things every single one of them did, he missed them.

Oh god he missed them.

The way Mary would ambush him with the latest bit of gossip, not leaving until she made sure that he appreciated just how juicy it was.

Darci tearing through books at an inhuman speed and picking up on themes and metaphors in them that Jim never would have spotted.

How Claire would laugh at every stupid joke he made and then follow it up with an even stupider joke.

And Toby….

The burning behind his eyes surged, forcing Jim to sniffle and swallow back tears as discreetly as he could.

He couldn't keep torturing himself like this. However things had been before their friendship was ashes now. It was better to let things die the way they were. After everything the four of them had done after learning about the scratches on the basement door, how they'd flipped out at all his lying….

He didn't want to know what they would do if they saw his other face. Jim would rather just hang on to the good memories he had of them and let those memories stay happy. Not tainted by whatever they would do if they….found out.

Jim was alone now, and that's just the way it had to be.

Blinking, he focused his gaze down on the polished wood beneath him, a gaunt face with hollow eyes staring back at him.

And whatever anger Jim felt when he thought about what his

friends did paled in comparison to what he felt every time he looked into a mirror after sundown.

Because while they might have called CPS, his friends weren't the ones who had two, arguably three, public meltdowns, hit his mom in the ribs, forced her into bad situations again and again, refused to be nourished by anything but raw, bloody meat.

When you untangled this entire mess, the common factor, the root of all these problems, was him.

This was all because of him.

Jim risked a glance up at his mom, she was still watching him from across the table, patiently awaiting his response.

But no matter how much he ruined her life, and how easier things would be for her if he just disappeared, Jim knew that his mom loved him with all her heart. So much that she'd poured blood, sweat, and tears, *years* of her life, into keeping him safe and as comfortable as possible.

And Jim couldn't let all that go to waste.

She'd lost so much already, Jim wasn't going to let his mom lose him to.

“Sure, sounds great,”

Looking relieved at his supposed enthusiasm, Barbara grabbed her keys and the tote bags and they headed out to the car. Despite the complete and utter turmoil their lives were in, the drive to the store hadn’t changed; passing the same streets and storefronts they always did.

Staring out the car window, watching the town go by, for a moment Jim could almost let himself forget and pretend everything was normal. That him and his mom were just out for a regular safe drive during their regular safe lives.

Then they drove past a dark haired, bearded man waiting at the bus stop.

Jim did a double take, stomach flip flopping. It wasn’t him, even if they did look pretty similar bus stop man had full sleeves of tattoos while *he* did not. Still, the passing resemblance shattered the illusion of normalcy, a question that had been lurking in the back of his mind for weeks rippling up to his mouth.

“Mom?”

“Yeah hon,”

“What are we gonna do about…..dad?”

She stiffened, arms going rigid against the steering wheel, before letting out a deep sigh and slumping back in her seat “I don’t know,”

Another long stretch of silence.

“What was dad….like?” Jim said at last “I remember a little bit, him playing with me and making you laugh. He seemed happy with us, but if he was happy he wouldn’t of….”

Barbara looked decidedly uncomfortable at his question “It’s...it’s more complicated than that,” she kept her tone even, eyes never leaving the road, but the bulging veins in her neck gave her away “We were both young when we met, I was a premed and he was a bartender, it was the first serious relationship for both of us, we’d only been dating two years when…”

“When you got pregnant with me and decided to get married?”

She winced, but nodded in confirmation “James was always...spontaneous, back before you were born it was one of the things I loved about him,”

Despite her whiteknuckled grip on the steering wheel and the obvious pain in her voice, a watery smile formed on Barbara’s lips “He’d show up after my classes with concert tickets, stay out all night on date nights, he was….fun,”

Then just like that the smile dropped off her face and every trace of fondness vanished “But things changed when we became parents,”

It only took a second for her to realize what she just said.

Barbara snapped her head over to Jim in a flash of panic “Not that any of this was because of you-- I-- it’s just…”

Drawing herself up, she seemed to struggle for words before letting out a heavy sigh, pulling over and stopping the car by the side of the road, bodily turning in her seat to give Jim her undivided attention “Jim, getting pregnant with you might have been an accident, but having you was a *choice* , a choice that I have never once regretted,”

She reached out and squeezed his shoulder “I did have to sacrifice some things, but I would happily do it all again if it meant having you in my life,”

Jim looked into her eyes, seeing the pleading desperation there, and managed to flash her a feeble smile.

Even though they both knew she’d given up a lot more than she ever should have.

Barbara returned his smile with one of her own, relaxing and leaning back in her seat while still keeping her hand on his shoulder “Now your father...I think he liked being married and being a dad, but I don’t think he really wanted to give up the kind of lifestyle we had before either. He still wanted to do things like go on random trips to Las Vegas over the weekend, things you can’t just do willy nilly when you have a young child. We fought a lot about that,”

“I don’t remember any of that,”

“We were very careful to never fight around you. And if things were going to get too bad we sent you across the street to play with Toby,”

Jim nodded along to show he was listening, but on the inside his stomach was turning in a way it probably should have been during the Salem conversation.

"So we'd already been having problems for a while," Barbara continued "And I guess one day he just decided to…"

She trailed off, but that was ok, Jim could figure out the rest. And even though he already knew, Jim couldn't help but bring up one last point "Wasn't he also cheating on you?"

Barbara's mouth straightened into a hard line, some inscrutable emotion washing over her face "Yes," she said tonelessly "That to,"

"So why'd he come back?"

She was quiet for a long time.

Jim slowly sat up, painful tightness creeping into his chest. This was a mistake, he never should have brought this up, he knew talking about dad was going to upset her so why did he even--

"I don't know," Barbara paused, glancing at him from the corner of her eye "Do you… .*want* to see him?"

The question caught him off guard and Jim had to think about it for a second. When he was little he'd dreamed about his dad coming home. Some of those daydreams even involved his dad showing up with a cure for his 'condition', but now….he understood a lot more.

It wasn't that he'd been missing his dad for the past ten years, he'd been missing having *a* dad. Someone to share the household burdens, to make his mom happy, to play with him and spend time together.

Jim still hadn't seen his dad since he'd come back to town, but he'd heard plenty. Both from his mom and his teachers after the stunt his dad had pulled at the school two weeks ago. That combined with what little he remembered from ten years ago and what Barbara had just told him was enough to show him what his dad was really like. And if that wasn't enough his dad had shown them exactly how much they really mattered to him when he walked away ten years ago without saying a word.

As far as Jim was concerned James Lake Sr was his father in DNA only.

He felt a caustic smile form on his lips.

Besides, there was no way he wouldn't completely lose it if he learned that his son was a monster.

Best case he'd start running for the hills, worst case….

It was just better if he didn't find out.

"No, I don't,"

Barbara, despite her best efforts to hide it, was clearly *massively* relieved. Enough to turn away and pull the car out onto the road to continue their drive.

It wasn’t until they were pulling into the parking lot that Jim realized that his original question hadn’t been answered.

What were they going to do now that his d-- now that James had decided to come back?

The caustic grin returned with a vengeance, he had to stop a bitter chuckle from rising up out of the back of his throat.

Whatever, it’s not like it was going to matter anyways.

Jim got out of the car and forced himself to not drag his feet as he followed his mom across the parking lot.

He honestly couldn’t bring himself to believe that they were going to find answers in Massachusetts, maybe he was being cynical and this was a great idea and they’d find a cure at last. Then they'd fix him and get CPS to leave them alone and everything would be ok, but no matter how hard he tried Jim just couldn’t bring himself to believe that.

And even if they did find a cure it wouldn’t change the fact that his friendships were broken beyond repair.

Over the past ten years his mom had looked into everything, no stone unturned, no possibility unchecked, but this….this seemed pretty far fetched.

And that was coming from someone who turned blue and sprouted

horns every time the sun went down,

Glancing over at his mom, Jim forced back the exhaustion and did his best to mirror her cheerful expression as they made their way into the store.

He would never say as much to her face, but deep down Jim knew that what happened to him was never going to change. And even if they managed to keep his secret under wraps from CPS, all he had to look forward to was being an unemployed recluse living with his mom in her house until she died, leaving him all by himself.

Jim was always going to end up completely alone, it just took him this long to figure that out.

Now all he wished was that he hadn't dragged so many people down with him.

They made a beeline for the produce department, Jim absentmindedly glancing around as they went along. Lemons, potatoes, apples, half off on gra--

He stopped dead in his tracks.

One aisle over from him there was Darci, standing next to her dad as he rummaged through the grapefruit, her eyes locked on him.

His heart dropped down into the pit of his stomach. Based on the way she was staring at him Darci definitely had something she wanted to say, and avoiding her in a crowded store wasn't going to be easy.

“I’m going to go see if they still have some of those granola bars that are on sale, those would be good to bring with us to Massachusetts, you mind getting the fruits and veggies?”

Jim opened his mouth in a panic, but before he could tell her not to leave him alone Barbara was already walking away.

Glancing back towards Darci, his stomach clenched when he saw her steadily approaching.

Darci’s heart was in her throat as she stepped up to Jim, they’d all agreed that the first one to get the chance should talk to him, but she’d really been hoping it wouldn’t be her.

Even if she didn’t just overhear something very worrying.

But she needed to get over it, there was a lot more at stake here than her own apprehension.

Those marks were made with a scalpel, no buts about it.

A lot more.

“What was that your mom was saying, about Massachusetts?”

Jim turned around and started going through the apples “Summer vacation, and don’t worry its not like it’s a secret, she’s already cleared it with CPS,”

“You’ve never left California in your whole life but now you’re going to the other side of the country for the summer?”

He shrugged without looking at her.

Darci bit her lip, that was…a concerning piece of news, but first things first.

“Jim, I’m worried about you, we all are,”

He ignored her, picking up an apple and examining it.

She wrung her hands together, teeth digging harder into her lip until she tasted copper. Darci really didn’t want to scare him with this next part, but it might be the only way to get through to him.

“A while back I overheard my dad talking about one of his cases, he thinks I didn’t hear but I did,”

Jim continued to ignore her, focusing on some non-existent blemish in the apple’s skin.

“It was a guy, his girlfriend would get really violent with him. She would bite, kick, throw dishes at him, threaten to kill herself if he ever left,”

He was still staring at the apple, but Darci saw him stiffen ever so slightly at her words.

“One day he did leave her, drove three hours away to stay with his brother. She showed up a week later, crying and begging him to come back, she promised that she changed and she wouldn’t hurt him any more,”

Despite her best efforts Darci’s breath hitched “So he went back,”

Jim slowly set down the apple in his hand, turning to peek at her from over his shoulder.

“That night she cooked him a really fancy dinner; steaks, salad, wine,”

As she forced herself to continue, Darci lost the battle of keeping the tremble out of her voice “The next morning neither of them showed up to work. When the police broke into the apartment they found them both sitting at the table, dead. They sent all the food to the lab, the wine bottle had enough sedatives in it to kill an entire football team,”

Jim was full on staring at her now, eyes big and skin ashy.

“She was holding a note, it said that she’d never let him leave her, no matter what,”

Darci trailed off, heavy silence weighing between the two of them even as the grocery store continued to bustle around them.

After what felt like ages Jim opened his mouth, and Darci knew what he was going to say before he could even get the words out.

My mom would never do that.

“My mom wouldn’t do that,” Jim said quietly.

“I’m sorry Jim but I can’t believe you, none of us can,” Darci said softly “For so long you lied about your curfew, what really happened on that camping trip, even when we all knew the truth about the basement you still tried to lie about it,”

She risked taking another step closer, Jim didn’t back away.

“I want to believe you when you say your mom would never hurt you, we all do, but we can’t, and I think you understand why,”

He had nothing to say to that, looking down and avoiding her eyes. A deep ache twisting in Darci’s belly.

Jim looked *awful* , he’d looked that way every day in class and when she’d first spotted him from across the store. But now, standing closer than he’d let any of them in the past month, it was clear just how miserable he was. The slump in his shoulders, dark bags under his eyes, gray cast to his skin.

Despite all his attempts to pretend otherwise, Jim wasn’t ok-- no, he hadn’t been ok for a very long time, it was only now just starting to show on the surface.

And whether or not he got the help he needed could very well depend on the next words out of Darci's mouth.

"I know you love your mom, and I believe you when you say your mom loves you, and…." she took a deep breath, taking the time so the next part came out exactly right "It was really unfair of us to trash her the way we did,"

Jim started at that, snapping his gaze back up to meet her eyes.

"All we saw one was little part of your life, you spent years and years with your mom, it's not fair for us to judge her based on one small piece of who she is, but…..whatever the rest of her is like, that little piece still isn't ok,"

She took half a step toward him "We don't want anything bad to happen to your mom, we just want to make sure you're safe. And we think...the best thing for that is if you lived somewhere else for a while,"

The words all started coming out in a rush, as if she got them out fast enough Jim wouldn't be able to object "You can always stay with any of us. Although I can completely understand why you wouldn't want to, my dad knows some good foster homes, you can look up the families yourself on…."

The change on Jim's face was instantaneous, like watching a door slam shut, sending Darci's heart plummeting down to the bottom of her gut. She knew from the hard look that had settled behind his eyes that Jim was never even going to consider doing any of those things.

He turned to walk away, but Darci dashed around him “Jim *please* , we’re not trying to make things bad for your mom, we just need you to be safe. I promise, and you can check with my dad and CPS to, you leaving for a bit won’t get her in trouble at all, and if you’re worried about her Toby says his Nana can help take care of her while you’re gone, don’t even think of it like leaving, think of it like summer camp, lots of kids spend summers away fro--”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jim cut her off in a clipped tone “None of that stuff is going to help anything, you don’t understand,”

“Then *tell* me,” Darci pleaded “Make me understand, I promise whatever it is, I’ll help, all of us will,”

“No. You won’t.”

Darci nearly took a step back before she stopped herself. From out of nowhere Jim’s voice had turned so bitter, so dark, that he barely sounded like himself “You guys say you stick with me if you hear the truth, that you’ll be supportive and understanding, but you won’t,”

She shook her head “Whatever it is we would never--”

He whirled on her, and this time Darci did stagger back from the intensity of his glare “You want to know the truth? You want to know the real reason behind all this? Well here it is, my mom’s not the bad guy here, *I am* . The one who’s fault this is, the real monster here, is me.”

All Darci could do was stand there with her mouth hanging open. None of what he’d just said made any sense. But something about the look on Jim’s face, the firm set of jaw and the flash in his eyes, more life to him than she’d seen in a long time, told her that Jim believed

every word of it.

Before she could try to figure out how to respond Jim quickly stepped around her. Darci spun, mouth open to call after him, only for her voice to shrivel and die in her throat when she saw Dr. Lake coming around the corner, Jim running right up to her side.

Watching Jim walk away with his mom, it felt like the weight of a thousand cinder blocks was pounding onto her.

Darci had lost her chance.

She failed.

Utterly crushed, she turned and trudged back over to her dad. When he caught sight of her it looked like he was about to ask her how the conversation with Jim had gone. But he ended up just putting three grapefruit in the cart and wordlessly ushering her along.

Apparently the look on her face was answer enough.

They finished their grocery shopping in near silence. Neither of them saying more than a word or two to each other until they were back home carrying their bags into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry that your conversation with your friend didn’t go as you hoped it would,” her dad said softly “Sometimes you can do everything right but things still don’t work out,”

Darci swallowed hard “Dad, what are the chances that CPS would just up and take Jim away from his mom?”

Louis winced, slowly setting the grocery bags down on the counter “I’m going to be straight with you, chances are that’s never going to happen,”

She froze right there on her feet, heart shriveling in on itself.

“Their house is clean, plenty of food. No evidence of drug use or recent violence,” he let out a husky sigh “For your friend to be removed there would have to be some kind of extreme event, like his mom taking him out of the hospital without being discharged ag--”

He stopped midword, clearly having revealed more than he intended.

“It’s ok dad, I already knew, everyone’s been talking about it for a while,”

His expression twisted into something strained before he continued “I can’t see your friend being removed without something like that happening again, and even then it’s no guarantee,”

Darci nodded at his words even as her intestines balled themselves into knots.

But what if the next ‘extreme event’ is the last?

“Is it ok if I go sit down for a bit?”

“Sure thing pumpkin, I’ll take care of the groceries,”

Darci gave him a quick nod, turning and heading up to her room. She felt bad about leaving her dad to take care of all the groceries by himself, but that was nothing compared to how guilty felt about what she hadn’t even done yet.

The plan they made to try and convince Jim to get out from under his mom had failed.

Now it was time for their back up plan.

And if her dad knew what they were planning on doing he would have to stop them.

Which is why she wasn’t planning on letting him find out.

Her heart flipped and fluttered as Darci reached the top of the stairs. The situation with Jim was bad, and they’d made it even worse with all the pushing and lying. What they should be doing was backing off and giving him space and letting Jim come to them when he was good and ready.

But things had changed and they couldn’t afford to wait.

The four of them had gone back and forth over what Jim’s dad being back in town would mean. But taking a trip across the country out of nowhere…she could only think Dr. Lake was planning on doing something terrible. She’d already taken Jim out of the hospital

without being discharged, and that was *before* James showed up and started pushing her buttons.

She forced back the sudden tightness in her throat, steeling herself as she marched the rest of the way to her bedroom.

They couldn't let Jim end up like that guy from her dad's case. Even if it meant that they had to do something really messed up.

Darci could live with being the bad guy if it meant saving Jim's life.

Only once she was in her room with the door shut and locked behind her, did Darci dare to take out her phone and pull up a very specific group chat.

Ran into Jim at the grocery store tried to give him the talk, didn't work

Her fingers shook, but Darci didn't hesitate as she typed out the next part.

Got some really bad news, tell you more in person, but we need to pick a day to carry out plan C

Chapter End Notes

> Here we get to see Jim at his absolute rock bottom. He's deep into self loathing of his troll form, lost all hope for the future, and the only reason he keeps putting one foot in front of the other is because he knows how much losing him would hurt his mom.
>
> And by now the other kids realized that their pushing and going behind Jim's back did a lot more harm than good in this situation,

and like Darci says, the thing they should really do right now is give Jim the time and space that he needs to feel comfortable again.

But circumstances have changed.

In an abusive situation the worst violence happens when the abuser feels like they are losing control. The other kids know this, even if they wouldn't be able to articulate it in as many words. And with Barbara's ex-husband sniffing around and news of an unexpected vacation they're worried (not irrationally) about what she's planning.

So the kids know that pushing Jim is the exact wrong thing to do right now, but they're also terrified for his safety. And they've decided that between pushing Jim's boundaries or running the risk of Jim getting badly hurt or killed, pushing boundaries is the lesser of two evils.

And coming up next is the moment you've all been waiting for. The Big Reveal.

Claire and Jim

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[image] False alarm, on our way back from the hospital, enjoy the rest of your sleepover :)

Claire shut her eyes and let out a gusty breath, deathgrip on her phone loosening.

Even though she knew it was inevitable, and due to happen any day now, she was relieved to have a little more time.

Her brother wasn't here yet.

Darkening her phone's screen, Claire opened her eyes and glanced around the dim room. Toby and Mary were standing lookout at the window, Darci was sitting at the desk, staring at the carpet and drumming her fingers against the wood while Claire herself was on the bed. They'd all agreed to keep the light off even after the sun went down, not wanting to risk anyone outside, or more specifically across the street, seeing them.

Reading the text from her dad wasn't enough to completely calm her down, with what they had coming that was pretty much impossible, but it did soothe her nerves more than a little.

Claire knew that what they were about to do was screwed up on a lot of levels, but they literally had no other options. It was already May, and once summer break rolled around Jim wouldn't even have school to escape to. Meanwhile his dad was still running around town doing

who knows what.

And if all that wasn't bad enough, Darci had overheard that Dr. Lake was planning to take Jim to the other side of the country.

Whatever she was planning on doing when they got there, it couldn't be good.

Their plan B had been to gently try and convince Jim to live somewhere else for a while. That had been a complete failure, not to mention they were still cleaning up the flaming wreckage from the half baked disaster that was plan A. Leaving them with no choice but to put their ultimate back up plan into action.

Claire pulled in a deep breath, forcing the jitters in her nerves out and away.

They could do this, *she* could do this, there were a lot of things about this plan that didn't sit quite right in her stomach, but with the four of them on board there was no way it wouldn't work.

She didn't want to think about what it would mean if it didn't.

Claire wasn't naive. She seen the movies, the magazines, the news. There were people out there that treated their kids like punching bags, sometimes the kids managed to survive and get away, but sometimes their parents went so far they ended up killing them.

And if they couldn't pull this off that could easily happen to Jim.

She gave her head a sharp shake to get rid of the thought. No. She couldn't let herself start thinking like that. She was going to do this. *They* were going to do this. And one way or another they were fixing the situation with Jim tonight.

And by the time Enrique was born and her mom was out of the hospital, both of them strong and healthy, Jim was going to be safe.

"Heads up guys," Toby's hushed voice carried across the quiet room, causing Claire to give a little start "It looks like Dr. Lake's leaving,"

Claire slid her phone into her pocket and followed Darci to join Toby and Mary at the window, watching across the street as Dr. Lake got into her car and drove off. They kept watch for a full five minutes after she left, just in case she forgot her purse or her wallet or something. Once it was clear that Dr. Lake was well and truly gone for the night; Claire knew it was time to make their move.

She sucked in a bracing breath.

This was it.

"Let's go,"

They headed downstairs and out the front door, making their way across the cul de sac. None of them said a word, moving toward their destination with grim determination.

But despite doing her best to look as confident as she was trying to feel, Claire was a bundle of half fried nerves stuffed into a too tight shell, and she had a pretty strong hunch that the other three were

feeling the same way.

This was going to get pretty messy, and more than a little ugly, but in the end they were going to get Jim the help he needed; not tomorrow, not next week, *today* . Right here right now.

And as much as the thought of what they were about to do made her feel nauseous, Claire knew that the only way out was through.

The four of them came to a stop at Jim's front door, and with only a slight tremble in his arm Toby reached up and rang the bell. For a moment nothing, then from inside they heard the shuffle of feet against the floor. Claire's pulse pounding in her ears as footsteps– as *Jim* came up to the door.

And when the footsteps stopped just behind the door, Jim no doubt staring out the peephole from behind it, Toby spoke up.

"Look Jim…I know things are nuts right now and you're probably really pissed at all of us, and we totally deserve it, but…." his voice cracked "We need to talk,"

Claire held her breath as Toby trailed off, she could see him, Mary, and Darci start tensing up as they waited to see how Jim would respond, and feel herself doing the same.

For a few seconds there was complete silence, then the sound of the footsteps again, slowly turning and walking away, leaving the four of them alone at the door. They all glanced at each other and shared a knowing look, the strained atmosphere slowly being replaced with one of steely resolve.

They'd been hoping for a lot better, but they'd been expecting this, and planned for it.

"I'll give him one more chance," Mary mumbled, stepping up next to Toby and reaching up to pound on the door herself "Jim, we're sorry, all of us are. We never should have pushed you about your mom and we never should have lied about calling CPS, we screwed up really bad and we understand if you don't want anything to do with us anymore,"

A slight but unmistakable tremor entered Mary's voice "But the things that are going on with you and your mom…those aren't ok, we can talk through the door if you want, but we do need to talk,"

No reply from Jim, not even coming back towards the door.

Mary's mouth narrowed into a firm line, she pounded on the door again, harder this time "I *know* you can hear me, we can hear you moving around in there, and we're not going anywhere until we talk this out,"

Again nothing, then all of a sudden they heard the faint whir of a vacuum cleaner coming to life from inside the house.

Effectively slamming the door in their faces without ever opening it in the first place.

Claire bit the inside of her cheek, guts feeling like gravel. She'd known things were probably going to turn out this way, but in the back of her mind she'd been hoping that *this time* Jim would actually listen to them.

Of course with how badly they'd screwed things up the first, and second times around, it didn't come as a huge surprise that he didn't.

Now all four of them needed to pull together and follow through. Because since the nice way hadn't worked, all they were left with was the hard way.

Pins and needles studded her stomach at the thought of pushing Jim even more, especially after how being pushy with him before had made everything so much worse.

But despite how much the guilt was already making her feel sick, Claire knew that she– that *they* had to suck it up and power through.

It was because of them that the whole situation with Jim got so bad in the first place, now they owed it to him to try and solve it, even if he didn't want their help.

She couldn't let her own mixed feelings get in the way of saving Jim's life.

With that in mind, Claire walked up to the door, reached a hand out, and tried the knob. Deadbolted, not that she'd been expecting anything else but she had to check "Toby you were able to open the garage, do you know any tricks for getting through regular doors?"

"No, but I do know another way in, follow me,"

They followed Toby around the side of the house, moving away from the light of the porch into the steadily darkening night. Then, seemingly at random, Toby dropped to his knees and started fiddling

with something on the ground. Claire blinked, eyes adjusting to the twilight gloom to see that Toby was actually kneeling by a basement window. Tugging and teasing at where it was connected to the frame.

“I think I can get this open just--”

With a twist of his wrists the window popped free, Toby gently setting the pane down in the grass, the rest of them clustering in and getting down on their knees beside him.

“Are you sure we can fit through there?” Darci said, eyeing the empty window skeptically.

“And it’s pitch dark in there,” Claire added “How do you know that there’s not something that could block us?”

“No I’m not, and I don’t, but if I go first I can find out,” then before any of them could try to stop him, Toby got down on his stomach and started squirming through the window.

Out of sheer panic and reflex, Claire shot out an arm, fully prepared to start dragging him back. But she stopped herself short. Toby was actually making pretty good progress, wriggling his body through the dark hole until only his calves were dangling out on the grass.

“Almost there guys,” Toby’s muffled voice came up through the window “Just a little--” suddenly his feet vanished into the dark hole. Claire, Darci, and Mary all jerking forward in alarm, a coarse grunt and the smack of flesh against concrete echoing up from the dark basement.

“Toby! Are you ok!?” Darci shoved her head through the window after him, voice tinged with concern.

“Yeah,” he called back up, Claire’s shoulders going limp with relief “I fell on my way in but I’m ok. C'mon I’ll catch you,”

Darci didn’t hesitate for a second, sinking down and slithering through the window, landing down below with a thump and a gasp. Claire glanced over at Mary, who gestured for her to go ahead.

Claire sucked in a breath to steel herself.

Whether he wanted it or not Jim needed help, and they were the only ones who could give it to him.

The only way out was through.

Knowing if she stalled any longer she was going to psyche herself out, Claire got down on her belly and started crawling through the narrow frame into the shadows beyond.

Just when she was starting to feel a little less anxious about crawling down into an unlit basement, she got stuck. Something catching on her middle and halting her in her tracks. Leaving her arms and torso dangling down into the basement and her legs stuck kicking around outside.

Claire twisted around and pushed against the wall surrounding the frame in an effort to free herself “Hang on guys I think I’m--” without warning a sharp, jabbing pain thrust into the softest part of her belly.

All rational thinking and efforts to be discreet flew out of her head. She shrieked, thrashing and flailing with everything she had to get away from whatever was stabbing into her stomach. Suddenly she jerked forward, pain vanishing as she tumbled through and started falling the rest of the way. Panic at the sharp pain instantly replaced with the terror of free falling. Claire scrambled around blindly, desperately trying to gain a hand or foothold somewhere. Her nails tore against wood, something cracking beneath her foot, stomach dropping as she plummeted into the basement.

Fortunately her descent was halted as Darci and Toby clumsily caught her. Not a very comfortable landing, but at least they kept Claire from slamming face first into the concrete floor.

“You alright?” Toby asked while they helped her to her feet.

“Yeah,” Claire shook off the sudden rush of adrenaline, heartbeat buzzing in her ears “Thanks guys, I just...”

She stopped short when she caught sight of the window frame, or more accurately, what used to be a window frame. The top was cracked in half, two jagged pieces hanging down into the empty window. It had probably already been splintering, which was why it caught on her shirt and poked her in the first place, Claire glanced quickly down able to just make out a small but jagged tear in her shirt and a faint red scratch on her stomach underneath it through the basement gloom, and her kick was just the finishing blow to break it completely. But now if anyone wanted to go through they would have to remove the nailed in pieces of wood. Meaning they couldn’t go back out that way, and Mary couldn’t get in.

“Sorry Mare,”

Claire caught a glimpse of Mary peeking down at them through the shattered wood “Keep going guys, I’ll find another way in, just stick to the plan,”

Hesitating only a moment, the three of them nodded at her, then started fumbling their way through the dark basement towards the stairs, stumbling more than a few times over an endless amount of boxes. Once she managed to get a hand on the railing, Claire was able to fumble around on the wall, find the lightswitch, and flick it on.

Her eyelids fluttered as the abrupt brightness burned into her pupils, Toby and Darci blinking right along with her.

“Uh Claire,” Darci said slowly “Won’t Jim notice if the light from the basement is….”

“He probably heard me falling in already, and besides, it’s better if he has a little warning,”

Understanding washed over their faces, Claire turning from them to gaze up at the door leading to the rest of the house.

“So…you guys ready?”

“No, “ Toby raised one foot onto the bottom step “Let’s go,”

Claire in the lead, they started their ascent. Her heartbeat ratcheting up with each step. With what was about to go down, nearly getting stabbed by a splintery piece of wood seemed comfortable by comparison.

All too soon they reached the top of the stairs. Claire reached out for the knob, only to see her hand shaking.

They'd pushed Jim into a corner before, they'd broken into his house before, and even months later Claire still didn't feel good about either of those things. Now they were about to do both at the same time.

"You guys ready?" Claire called to Darci and Toby behind her, she barely registered their sounds of assent, the question had been more for her in the first place.

"Then let's go," Claire grabbed the knob, and swallowing the last of her nerves, turned it and cracked the door open. Heart in her throat as she cautiously peeked into the hallway.

"Jim? You here?"

The kitchen was deserted, a quick glance revealed the living room was to. But strangely the still running vacuum cleaner was laying in a heap on the floor in front of the couch. Rythmic thumping and the sound of a door slamming came from above them.

It took less than a second for the wires to click in her brain.

Jim heard them coming and he'd run upstairs to get away.

Leaving her teetering back and forth between relief that she had a little more time to mentally prepare, and frustration that the anxiety of the situation was being prolonged.

Claire stepped all the way through, Darci and Toby hot on her heels.

“He went upstairs, let’s go,”

Not running but moving with a certain urgency, the three of them hustled towards the second flight of stairs, Claire only making a quick detour to unlock the front door. Hopefully Mary would come around and she could get in that way.

Now following along after Darci and Toby, Claire reached the top of the stairs right behind them. All the doors around them were open except for one. Jim’s bedroom. With Jim locked inside it. The three of them wordlessly moved to stand in front of the closed door.

Claire reached out for the knob before quickly thinking better of it and drawing her hand back to her side. They’d broken enough trust and boundaries already, tonight and in the months leading up to this. If Jim felt safer talking to them from behind a door then that’s what they would do.

The important thing was they had Jim in space where he couldn’t get away from them anymore.

Now all they had to do was make him listen.

Jim didn’t even dare to breathe, holding the doorknob firmly in place. The door was locked, but it could be picked by anyone with half a brain and a paperclip, so he wasn’t taking any chances. He hadn’t

even turned on the lights when he ran in here, people used lights to see things, and right now Jim's whole focus was on *not* being seen.

When he'd first heard the strange noises coming from the basement he wasn't quite sure what they were, it was when the footsteps had started coming up the stairs that it hit him like a punch to the gut.

Toby, Claire, Darci, and Mary were *in his house* . They'd broken in and come up through the basement. Now that doorknob was the only thing between them and—

Take deep breaths. Five in, hold for five, five out.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Keep it together. Don't lose your cool. Just focus on keeping his grip in the doorknob steady. That's all that mattered right now. The doorknob and making sure it didn't move.

That's what he was going to think about. Not the door. Not the people on the other side of it who shouldn't *be here* –

Just him and the doorknob in his hand.

“We know you’re in there Jim,” Toby’s voice came from behind the door, softer than he expected, not that it did anything to decelerate his galloping heartbeat “Please come out, we need to talk,”

Jim didn’t budge so much as an inch. They knew that he was in here, and he knew that they knew he was in here, but just because they knew and he knew didn’t mean they could make him say anything.

Just stay still and quiet. Hold on to the doorknob, keep them out, keep calm, and everything was going to be ok.

They weren’t going to come in. They weren’t going to see him. Don’t panic. Don’t panic. *Don’t pan* –

“Ok….look,” there was a soft thump against the other side of the wood, and plain as day he could see Toby pressing his forehead on the other side of the door “I know we did some messed up stuff, we lied and we pushed you way too hard, but Jim I’m *scared* for you,”

There was a shuffle as someone else came up to the door “We all are,” Claire’s this time “We don’t want anything to happen to your mom, we just need to know that you’re safe,”

Jim swallowed hard, he *knew* the best thing to do right now was to just keep quiet, but it was getting harder and harder to fight the burning urge to *say something* .

When it became clear that he was going to lose the battle, Jim forced the words to come out as smooth as possible instead of gravelly, made ten times harder by the tightness in his throat “I’m fine guys, I don’t need any help,”

Even as he spoke Jim cringed at how stilted and awkward he sounded.

"Jim we all know you are *not* fine," Darci this time "Things with you aren't fine and they haven't been for a long time. We know it, you know it, can we please just talk about it?"

Jim had to stifle a low pitched rumbling noise threatening to rise up from deep inside his gut. Clamping his throat down on the sound and tightening his grip on the knob.

Now was *not* the time to start growling of all things.

Don't talk. Don't make a sound. Don't even move. Just stay like he was and hold the door shut. And eventually they'd be forced to give up and go away.

"I know you've got a lot of stuff going on that you don't want people knowing about," Toby again "And if you'd rather not…you don't have to tell us about it,"

That caught him off guard.

"Really?" he spoke without even thinking, the word tumbling rough and coarse before he could remember to polish it into something normal sounding.

The seconds stretched on with nothing but silence coming from the other side of the door. Jim's ribcaged constricting around his pounding heart and panting lungs.

“So here’s the thing,” Claire, she sounded more than a little uncomfortable “We’ll stop asking and trying to figure out what goes on with you and your mom, but only if you agree to move out,”

Jim’s mouth went dry, his jaw dropping open. Grip on the doorknob going slack before he caught himself and tightened it hard enough that his fingers made dents.

“If you don’t want to move out you then need to explain to us exactly what’s going on and convince us that you’re perfectly safe living with your mom. And we’re not leaving until you agree to one or the other,”

Jim couldn’t move, staring at the door, head spinning with overwhelming dread that grew deeper and deeper by the second.

This was bad, neither of those things was an option for him. He was trapped. He was stuck in here and they weren’t leaving–

“We can stay out here as long as we need to,” Toby’s voice again, this time with a frustrated edge to it “And if you don’t give us an answer tonight we’ll be back tomorrow, I know your mom’s work schedule. We can do this for as many nights as it takes,”

Jim bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. Dizzy at the thought of repeating this tonight and tomorrow and the next night and the night after that–

Don’t think about that. Shove the thought as far away as he could. Five in, hold, five out. Repeat.

Just him and the doorknob. A hand locked around the knob and the

rest of him as still as a statue. That was one good thing about his monstrous form, he could stay completely still without any of his muscles cramping. Jim could do this forever if he had to.

And he had to. He couldn't let them find out. He couldn't let anyone find out. If they did they'd hunt him down and lock up his mom–

"I know you said we wouldn't understand what's going on with you, and maybe we won't," Darci this time "But whatever it is I promise we'll be on your side,"

Jim could barely hear her past the blood rushing in his ears, if it weren't for the fact he was a living statue he'd be trembling all over.

They said they'd stay by his side, and maybe they even believed that. But they wouldn't– couldn't, what Jim turned into, what he was, it was too much for them to handle. For anyone. Most days even *he* could barely handle it.

That's why he had to keep the secret, there was no other option, and what would happen if people did find out was too terrible to consider.

Being locked up, diced to pieces, never seeing his mom again. Killed or taken away. That's what would happen if anyone out there saw him like this. That's why he needed to keep it secret, if anyone saw they would….they would….

They…would…

Jim's grip on the doorknob loosened by a fraction.

They were his *friends* , or they used to be at least, all they wanted was to help, they wouldn't do anything to *hurt* him.

Something flashed behind his eyes, an idea too ludicrous to ever let himself consider before, hoisted from the depths of his mind by the rising tide of hysteria and dread.

What if he opened the door?

What if he showed them the truth, right here and now, shattering the protective cover of secrecy he'd spent so long maintaining in a single blow.

Would they run, scream? Would they even recognize him? Maybe they wouldn't see Jim at all, just a monster. They might even try to attack him, or call the police to do the same, or maybe they'd– they'd–

His breath hitched.

Or maybe they'd handle it just fine.

There were plenty of movies and books about werewolves and other people transforming into monsters, so they'd at least be able to understand a little bit. And he looked different but not really *that* different, maybe they could look past the stone and the horns and see him for who he really was.

They *said* that whatever was going on they'd be on his side, so maybe….

So maybe he should believe them.

A hot fluttery feeling shot through him, filling Jim with a dizzying feeling of lightness.

Maybe Jim didn't have to be alone. Maybe he didn't have to feel so scared and trapped all the time. Maybe they really would stick with him. Maybe–

Then Jim caught a glimpse of his hand still locked around the doorknob; stony blue flesh, one less finger than normal, nails dark as charcoal.

The thought sputtered and died just as fast as it had flickered to life.

They said that whatever was going on they'd understand, and maybe they actually believed that, but there was no way that they ever possibly could.

All of this, what Jim *was,* not just on the surface, all the way down to his bones, wasn't anything they could even comprehend.

What he changed into, the monster Jim really was, wasn't something he could trust with anyone besides his mom.

Apart from her he was alone.

And no matter how much it hurt he needed to accept that.

“Guys just…” Jim struggled to keep his voice even “Just go home,”

A chorus of protests rose from behind the door. Jim ignored them, focusing on keeping his grip steady. With how strong he was like this there was no way they were getting the door open. Eventually they’d just be forced to give up and go home. And maybe they would be back tomorrow and the next night and the night after that, but Jim would block them out of his room every time.

If they were going to turn this into a battle of wills there was no way he was going to lose. Jim had been keeping this secret for his entire life, he could outlast the four of them no matter how long they–

The snap of the window latch echoed from behind him and all thought vanished.

“Sorry Jimmy-Jam but not today,”

His heart stopped.

Too late Jim realized, to his growing horror, that one voice had been missing from behind the door in front of him, now coming from the window behind him.

“We aren’t taking no for an answer this time,”

There was a smooth rustle as the pane was lifted upwards.

A creeping chill swept over him. Blood turning to ice in his veins, a silent scream locked in his throat.

Jim found himself, pulled by some primal, nameless instinct, involuntarily turning towards the soft scuffling sounds, barely audible over the roaring in his ears, watching the familiar figure crawl onto his desk through the open window.

Mary straightened and pushed herself upright “So you had better...just…”

The second they locked eyes time stopped, Jim could only watch in horror as her eyes slowly widened, every speck of color leeching from Mary’s skin as her mouth dropped open. Knowing what was about to happen and being utterly powerless to stop it.

She screamed, so loud and sharp that it actually hurt, shattering the spell and sending him staggering back.

This was bad. This couldn’t be happening. Jim had to get out, get away. Run away from here and–

That’s when he realized that the doorknob was no longer in his hand.

“Mary!” Claire’s frightened voice came from behind the door, the naked doorknob rattling “What’s wrong!?”

Jim scurried back further and further until there was no more room to retreat, clawing against walls and furniture, futilely trying to escape

even though there was nowhere to escape to. Mind empty except for a burning desire to get *away* –

Then he heard the doorknob click as the lock popped open, his heart dropping down into the pit of his gut, even as he scrambled on top of his dresser in a flurry of flailing limbs.

Somehow the thought that bubbled to the top of the raging tsunami of horror inside him was that it turned out he actually could tremble when he was made of stone.

The door swung open wide, three familiar shapes stepping inside and flicking on the light, Jim's entire world crashing down around him.

Chapter End Notes

> Art at the end is a commission from UndeadChestnut, big thank you to her and go check out her stuff on tumblr. She does a ton of amazing TOA art.
>
> I'd really like to say that the next chapter is going to be up soon, but with work and the holidays I am crazy busy, so it won't be out for a bit. Right now my target date is January 22nd, but

depending on how the next few weeks go that could easily be pushed back.

Next time: Now that Jim's biggest secret is out in the open, there's nothing holding Jim back from telling Toby, Darci, Mary, and Claire exactly how their actions over the past few months have affected him. But once the dust settles, what is it that he really wants from them?

Toby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't like their plan to get Jim to either move out or fess up was going well to begin with, but when he heard Mary start screaming from inside Jim's room Toby knew something was *deeply* wrong.

The three of them surged towards the door, Claire frantically twisting at the knob "Mary! What's wrong!?"

No reply, her screams had died down and now there was just silence that was somehow ten times worse than any amount of noise.

Hands shaking, Claire pulled a clip out of her hair and twisted it into the lock, the lock popping open. Allowing her to throw the door open, reaching inside to flick on the light as they all rushed in to see—

Toby stopped dead in his tracks, Darci and Claire doing the same, from the corner of his eye he could see Mary perched on top of Jim's desk, but that wasn't nearly as alarming as what was directly in front of him.

A guy, a *big* guy, was crouched on all fours on top of the dresser in the far corner of the room. But the most noticeable thing about him wasn't his size, or even the fact that he was a home invader, it was that his skin was blue. Not just-a-touch-of-hypothermia blue, but full on sky-freaking-blue from head to toe.

The weirdness didn't stop there. Pointy elf ears, ginormous fangs poking out of his half open mouth. A sharp looking pair of horns

jutting out of the top of his head.

The sight was so jarring Toby couldn't even think.

No one in the room moved, not even the stranger, all of them frozen in place by shock and panic. None of them even dared to twitch, much less make a sound. Then, after what felt like hours but could only have been seconds, Mary squeaked out "Who are you, what are you doing here!?"

Big blue and horny just blinked at them with wide eyes.

Toby would like to know that to. Had some crazy cosplayer broken into Jim's house? Who was this guy? What was up with the D&D get up? Why was he here? And where was--

The world pivoted on its axis; nearly knocking Toby off his feet. Nothing in the room moved, but suddenly everything was different.

No. It couldn't be….

Toby took another look at the guy, and this time he *really* looked.

The clothes the guy was wearing, that dark hair, those wide blue eyes--

This was impossible, this didn't make any sense, no way this guy could be….

But the more he stared the more his brain struggled to accept what he already felt in the pit of his gut, until Toby found himself opening his mouth.

“Jim? Is that you?”

The big guy flinched at the question, all but confirming the answer.

“Oh my god it is you!”

Claire and Mary let out sharp gasps, while Darci just kept her wide eyed gaze locked on the dresser in the corner.

This didn’t make any sense, at all, but somehow Toby knew right down to his bones that it was Jim standing in front of him.

“Wait what?” Claire started, whipping her head back and forth between Toby and Jim, the strange different Jim “You can’t be Jim--”

Toby threw both arms out in exasperation “Who else could he be!? We were talking to Jim a second a go and there’s no one else in here,”

“He’s too tall,” Darci whispered “Jim’s an inch and a half shorter than me and that guy….” she eyed the figure perched on top of the dresser warily “Has to be over six feet, he can’t be Jim,”

“Jim,” Toby said softly, taking half a step closer to the guy-- not ‘the

guy', *Jim* in the corner "I know it's you, please say something,"

Jim,

It was Jim it had to be Jim,

Didn't move an inch from his stiff crouch on top of the dresser, which now that Toby noticed, had to be pretty uncomfortable. Toby, Darci, Claire and Mary all staring at him in expectant silence, waiting to see how he would respond.

"Yeah…" Toby jolted a little as a lower, gravely version of what was still undeniably Jim's voice rumbled out "It's me,"

Vindication and confusion all wrapped up together shot through Toby, sending him reeling. They'd figured out the who; but they were still left with the what, how, and why.

"I don't understand," he babbled "Why are you wearing a tiefling costume?"

Jim worked his jaw, revealing more and more huge sharp teeth, as he struggled for words "I-- I--"

Claire frowned and took a few steps forward "Hang on….Jim, where exactly did you get that costume?"

That sparked something in Toby's head. Perking up at her words; Darci, Mary, and Toby also shuffled closer towards the corner, Jim

cringing and crouching lower in response.

Toby might be considered a dork by the majority of his peers, but even they would agree that he was a geology dork, not a cosplay dork. So it was safe to say that makeup and special effects weren't Toby's areas of expertise, but even he had a basic idea of how they worked. Plastic teeth over real ones made vampire fangs, latex prosthetics turned round ears pointy, horns could be added with a simple headband, and with body paint anyone could paint themselves any shade of the rainbow.

So yeah Toby understood the basics of special effects makeup, and after a lifetime of watching sci fi and fantasy movies he'd learned to spot the little imperfections that gave them away.

And right now; to his growing dread, he wasn't spotting any of them.

There weren't any subtle changes in color or texture that hinted at body paint or latex, the teeth and horns fit too well and did *not* look like plastic. And like Darci said, he was too tall. There were costumes that could give the illusion of added height, but this wasn't one of them, not even close.

Icy fingers scraped down his spine, Toby felt himself start to shake.

Everything he was looking at only added up to one conclusion. One that didn't make any sense, one that refused to take a coherent shape in his head.

Until Claire beat him to the punch.

“That’s…that’s not a costume….is it?”

The room went deafeningly quiet. The four of them staring at Jim with held breath for the longest time until Jim finally lowered his head and mumbled “No, it’s not,”

Toby’s heart dropped down into the pit of his gut, limbs numb and tingling. From the corners of his eyes he could see Mary’s already chalky face getting paler, Darci covering her mouth in shock, and Claire’s eyes growing to the size of dinner plates,

“Oh my god Jim!” Mary shrieked hysterically “What happened to you!? How long have you been like this!?”

Jim's shoulders started shaking, a sharp barking sound abruptly escaped him, startling them. It took Toby a few seconds to realize the sound was laughter.

“Either a few hours ago or ten years ago, take your pick,”

Mary was still gaping in shock “J– Just how are you like this, *what the hell happened!?* ”

Just like that all traces of amusement on Jim’s face vanished, wincing and pressing himself further into the corner.

Claire raised her hands reassuringly “It’s ok Jim, I promise we won’t freak out on you, just… just help us understand what’s going on here,”

Toby followed Claire's lead and took a step closer to the dresser "C'mon Jim, talk to us,"

Jim stayed still and silent as a statue. A tall, horned, fanged statute.

Now Darci and Mary were pressing in closer to, Jim no more than a foot away from each of them.

"Jim…" Toby said slowly "What *happened* to you?"

Still nothing but silent wide eyed staring from Jim.

The unease deepened into a palatable sinking feeling in Toby's gut. His nerves were shot and he was getting dangerously close to losing it unless he got some kind of *answer* . Desperate, Toby took another step forward and—

From out of nowhere an ear-splitting crack echoed through the room, the four of them jerking back in surprise. With a start Jim raised his hand, shards of wood tumbling to the floor, jagged cracks running along the top of the dresser all leading to the corner Jim had been gripping, now shattered into pieces.

Toby was faintly aware of his jaw dropping open.

Jim had just pulverized a solid wooden dresser with his bare hand, and based on the horrified look on his face it was completely unintentional.

Seeing the obliterated wood the sinking feeling in his belly somehow got even heavier.

Something was wrong, more than just the costume that wasn't a costume. Jim was bigger, somehow, but not so big that he should be able to effortlessly shatter wood with his bare hands.

Toby opened his mouth, not even sure what he was going to say, but then stopped short.

Seeing Jim perched up there brought up the memory of when Detective Butternuts, aka cat #4, had been cornered by Jerry's schnauzer. Wide eyed and hackles raised, pressing himself further and further into the corner, ready to flee or attack any who dared get too close –

Snapping off a piece of wooden furniture without even trying

All at once everything came crashing down inside him.

Jim was *terrified.*

Toby's breath hitched as the realization pounded into him again and again.

Jim was *scared* . Jim was scared out of his mind, and what was Toby was doing? Pushing him further and further into a corner, *literally,* ignoring how Jim was *very* uncomfortable and steamrolling over him to try and get answers the way *he* wanted.

The same crap he'd been doing for months now.

Trembling, Toby took several hasty steps back.

No. He wasn't going to do this. He couldn't keep making the same mistakes again.

Right now he needed to do what he *should've* done *months* ago.

"Ok I can tell you're feeling a lot right now," Toby stammered out, glancing from side to side, trying to catch the girls' eyes "So how about we leave you alone for a bit to chill out for a little while,"

One by one he saw their eyes widen with understanding, perking up every so slightly as they picked up on what he was trying to do, backtracking to the door along with him.

"We'll be downstairs," Claire said as they all filed out "We…do want to talk, but we'll wait until you're ready, however long it takes,"

"Yeah totally," Darci said with a vigorous nod "Take all the time you need, no rush, at all,"

Jim's only response was a single stiff nod of his own before he disappeared behind the door as Mary pulled it closed. The four of them hastily scurrying down to the living room and wordlessly seating themselves on the couch.

The silence lasted all of sixty seconds.

“So…” Darci said slowly, drumming her fingers against her knees “Someone please tell me that we did actually see Jim blue seven feet tall with horns and I didn’t just hallucinate that,”

“Nope,” Mary muttered “I saw it to, that-- that was real,”

“Yeah but *was* that?”

Toby would like to know that to. Was there some kind of disease that made people turn blue? Copper poisoning….maybe, and even that wouldn't explain the horns and the fangs *and th* –

“Magic,”

Everyone in the room slowly turned to look at Claire, who didn’t waver in the slightest under the combined force of their shell shocked stares.

“I mean think about it, it’s the only possible explanation, for Jim transforming like that,”

“B-- but magic’s not….” Mary trailed off, silence filling the room again, thick and tacky.

Toby’s thoughts exactly. It couldn’t be magic because magic wasn’t *real* . This was *real life* , not an episode of Game of Thrones.

Of course the people on Game of Thrones didn't think magic was real until they saw people changing faces and spitting out shadow demons.

Ok so it looked like magic was in fact real, but Toby really didn't have the emotional space to unpack that right now.

He fought the urge to glance up as above him he heard the floorboards creak from what could only be Jim moving around in his room.

First things first, figure out exactly what was going on with Jim, then start trying to find out which one of his classmates was a Wizard.

The conversation died down, everyone way too tense to try and make small talk. Darci picked up a book from the coffee table and started flipping through it half heartedly, Mary fell into a loop of pulling her phone out, moving to unlock the screen, deciding against it, and then sliding back into her pocket for all of ten seconds before the cycle started over again. Claire was in her own little world, staring off into the distance, face pensive.

All of them waiting for Jim to come down and give some much needed answers.

Toby tried to put his thoughts together the best he could, when Jim did eventually come down he wanted to be able to ask cohesive questions and not just babble nonsense, but everything in his head was too jumbled and panicked to come together. And again and again he kept coming back to the same cluster of thoughts flashing in the front of his brain.

Magic is real.

Jim's affected by it.

Horns and fangs flashed in his mind against a background of cobalt blue along with jagged shards of wood.

*The magic **changes** him.*

It took a long time, nearly an hour based on the clock hanging on the far wall, but eventually Toby heard the tell-tale creaking of someone heading down the stairs. Darci snapped the book shut and tossed it back on the table, Mary's phone went back into her pocket and stayed there. Four sets of eyes turning and locking onto the staircase.

Jim, the big blue version, slowly came into view as he descended the stairs. He'd know that he was taller, but now seeing Jim standing upright, Toby was blown away by just how *tall* he was. Jim wasn't huge the way a bodybuilder would be, but he was big enough that he could easily get picked for the football team.

The shattered dresser flashed in his mind.

Scratch that, Jim could probably fight a whole football team, solo, and win.

Fidgeting like crazy, and looking pretty cagey overall, Jim cautiously crept into the living room, the four of them watching him intently, and took a seat in the recliner.

Again he was struck by just how *different* Jim looked, more than just

the height. And now that he was actually calm enough to process what he was looking at, Toby could see that there was a lot more.

Jim's nose was flatter and hooked, his facial features more angular in general, complementing his pointed ears. His hair was longer, shaggier; more fur than hair.

Clumps of fur and teeth hidden away in a box in the attic.

His hair didn't look like it was just limited to his head either, going all the way down his neck and probably at least partway down his back from the look of it. Twin patches of fur on each arm heading towards his elbows to.

And his right hand was missing a finger. Not like one had been cut off, but like the fifth finger simply wasn't there and never had been.

"So…." Jim started slowly, huskier voice catching Toby off guard "What do you guys want to know?"

Mary didn't waste a single second.

"What happened to you?" she blurted out "What made you...like this?"

He shuffled slightly in his seat "....this….happens to me when the sun goes down, and…when the sun rises in the morning…I….turn back to normal,"

“So….like Shrek rules?” Darci cut in “By night one way, by day another?”

Jim chewed on his lip, or maybe his teeth just did that now, Toby couldn’t really tell “Yeah that’s basically how this works,”

Claire turned bodily in her seat to face him directly “Is it…magic that makes you change?”

“I…guess?”

Mary raised an eyebrow “What do you mean you ‘guess’?”

“Well I….I’ve never understood how it happens, and no one ever really told me how it works…but I…guess it’s magic,”

“And what is it exactly you turn into?” Darci asked “Are you like a….were-gargoyle?”

“I…I don’t know,”

“How do you not know what you are?”

“I– look, it’s not like this came with an instruction book, all I know is that every sunset I turn into what you’re looking at right now, and every sunrise I turn back,”

Even though he was staring the evidence straight in the face, Toby

could still barely believe it “You…turn into this…magically…every time the sun goes down?”

He nodded.

“How long has this been going on?” Claire asked “I mean you weren’t born like this….were you?”

Jim wriggled uncomfortably “This…. This has been happening to me for about ten years,”

Toby had only just started to process that bit of information when Mary jumped in.

“Hang on, is this why you have a super early curfew? Why you can’t do sleepovers or stay out late!?”

Squirming, Jim nodded again.

Realization shot through Toby, pushing himself up straighter against the couch.

Transforming every sunset and back every sunrise. Happening for over ten years. Nearly as long as Toby had known him, with Jim’s curfew being in place for as long as he could remember.

“So…” Darci leaned forward “Dr. Lake doesn’t lock you up?”

Just like that every trace of anxiety vanished from Jim, going completely still in his chair, expression hardening into steely determination “No. She doesn’t. I stay home because I have to and it as nothing to do with my mom,”

Toby just stared at Jim in mute shock, conversation still flowing around him.

“That’s it?” Claire said slowly “No being locked up in the basement or anything, you just stay home because of….this,”

“Yep, that’s it,”

All Toby could do was blink, body frozen, voice petrified, emotion slowly bubbling up from deep in his gut.

Despite everything, all the events that had led to this moment to the sheer impossibility of what Toby was looking at, it was those words echoing in his mind that caused heat to boil over and explode in his chest, bursting out of him.

“Are you *kidding* me!?”

Everyone in the room snapped towards Toby.

He stomped off the couch, hands balled into fists at his sides “For *months* I thought you were in danger. I thought that your mom was going to hurt you, and now you say that was never true at all!?”

Jim's strange new features twisted into a stricken expression "I...I…"

Claire immediately jumped to her feet "Ok, let's all just pause and take a breath here," she shifted her gaze from a crushed looking Jim, to the hang-jawed Mary and Darci sitting next to her, and then to a smoldering Toby standing in front of the far end of the couch "Toby I get that you're upset, but yelling at each other isn't going to solve anything,"

Toby didn't move his burning glare an inch from Jim, who was now fidgeting under his gaze with a guilty expression.

"Jim, I can understand why you didn't tell us right away," Claire shifted from foot to foot, tense as a wire "But why didn't you tell us when we started asking? We would have believed you,"

"I--"

"No this goes *way* beyond that," Toby spat "You had ten. Whole. Years. Before all this, before *any* of this!"

Toby knew he was losing it big time, and if he was any louder he might wake up Nana across the street. But right now none of that mattered nearly as much as the burning hurt deep inside him.

Ten years. Ten years and Jim had never once mentioned this to Toby. Because even though Jim had always said they were BFFs, he'd never trusted him, not really. And for no goddamn good reason. Toby had never been anything but there for him, for crying out loud he'd thought the tooth fairy was real until he was *eleven* , he was more than capable of handling *this* .

Toby felt the sharp sting of fingernails stabbing into his palms as his fists tightened even further, cheeks burning.

Or maybe Jim had never really thought of him as a friend at all. Just some chump to hang around with that was easy to fool.

“All those weeks, every day I was scared that you were going to be hurt or killed, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it, but now you’re saying you were never in any danger at all!?”

Jim’s face had twisted into something deeply pained, and the girls were all staring at Toby in horror, Darci was completely petrified and Mary and Claire were frantically gesturing at him to stop, but Toby had a lot to say and goddamn he was going to say it.

“You should have told us,” he muttered bitterly “You should have told us before all this crap hit the fan, but you decided you’d rather deal with this alone and hang us all out to dry instead.”

Dead silence filled the room.

Meanwhile Toby was still burning inside. How could he, *how could he?* Why didn’t Jim just tell them the truth? They may have messed a few things up, but they were only trying to help. The four of them did everything they could to help him, but he still didn’t trust them—trust *him* . Why didn’t he tell him years ago? Before all this got bad. For so long Jim had been his only friend, but it turned out that their friendship had never meant nearly as much to Jim is it did t--

“You think I *wanted* to be alone?”

Toby gave a little start, Jim's voice was still low and raspy, but now had a razor sharp edge.

"You think I *like* being stuck in the house by myself all the time? Did you think this was fun!? You think this is a *fucking* game to me!?"

Jim shot to his feet, eyes blazing. With his new height he easily towered over the four of them. Toby found himself taking an involuntary step back, sudden stab of alarm shooting through him.

But even if he was bigger like this he was still Jim and Jim would never–

"So you've been scared for weeks? I've been scared every day for *ten years!* "

Toby backtracked until he found himself sitting on the couch again, scooting back further and further until there was no more space to retreat. Claire stayed standing, staggering back and gripping the arm of the couch with claw like fingers. All four of them shrinking away as Jim loomed over them.

Don't panic. Keep it together. This is still Jim, he's bigger and has extra parts and changed color, but he's still hu–

Ice settled in Toby's chest. Heartbeat faltering.

No. He didn't know that at all. Toby had absolutely no idea how deep the changes in Jim ran.

“Do you have *any* idea what it’s like to have this happen to me every night!?” Jim snapped “To spend years trapped in your own house? News flash, I don’t just stay inside because I feel like it, I do it because if anyone else saw me like this they’d shoot me on sight!”

Toby floundered for words “Jim I’m sorry I….I….”

“And you guys called CPS on me,”

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed.

Jim glowered down at them, slowly raising a finger to point towards himself “What do you think CPS and the cops would do if they saw me like this?”

The words hit Toby like a sledgehammer to the chest. Agonizing and knocking every bit of air from his lungs.

“Oh my god,” Darci said in a hushed whisper “I’m so sorry, I never would have made the call if I had kno—”

“Things weren’t perfect,” Jim continued as if she hadn’t spoken at all “But mom and I made it work,”

He shot a smoldering glare around at each of them “Then you guys,” pure venom dripped from his voice “Went and ruined everything,”

Emotion tightened around Toby’s throat, choking as the realization sank in.

They could have gotten Jim *killed* .

He'd begged them to back off and they didn't listen and he could have been killed because of all their meddling. They deserved every bit of the anger and bile he was throwing at them.

Toby fought to keep from trembling as Jim's words became lower and more gravelly than anything a human voicebox was capable of making.

But just how far was Jim going to go in his anger?

Stay calm, this was still Jim. Now matter how he looked it was still Jim. And Jim wouldn't lash out at them. No matter how mad he was Jim would never hur–

"I've spent *every* night for the past four months wondering if this is the night that someone finds out," he growled "That this is the night my life ends. That someone in the police or CPS sees me like this and sends a squad to drag me away to a dissection table in a secret government lab,"

"I– I'm sorry," Claire managed to stammer out "We never meant to…."

One scathing look from Jim shut her up.

"I told you over and over again. Mom. Never. Hurt me. For the past ten years she's sacrificed *everything* just to keep me safe. But no matter how many times I told you mom wasn't the bad guy here. You. *Didn't.*

Listen! And now thanks to you guys, the one person who's always been there for me could go to prison!"

There was nothing even remotely human about Jim's voice now. All snarls and barks in the shape of words. And the low, unmistakable rumble of a growl.

Beside him Toby could feel Darci start to tremble, all could manage to do was stammer like an idiot "I— I—"

"Calling the cops, lying to me, *breaking into my house!?* It was never my mom, you guys were the ones putting me in danger! You guys were the ones who ruined my life!"

Speech failed him, Toby just sat there with his mouth gaping open and shut, palms clammy and quivering from head to toe.

"You guys didn't listen when I said my mom doesn't hurt me, ignored me when I begged you not to call CPS, lied to my face, *broke into my house!* "

Guilt and terror battled for dominance in his mind as Toby and the girls all shrank back against the couch as Jim advanced closer.

"For once, just *once,* can you guys actually listen to me!?" Jim snarled, teeth bared "Stop prying into stuff that's none of your business. Stop sneaking around behind my back! Stop digging into stuff that has nothing to do with you and just *leave. Me. Alone!* "

A hush fell over the room, Jim silently standing over the four of them on the couch, breath coming in short, sharp pants.

For the longest time no one dared to move. Then, slowly, Jim leaned back out of his crouch, still looking absolutely furious, but not like he was about to pounce.

He wasn't going to attack, he was just angry.

A wave of guilt crashed over Toby.

This was Jim. Of course he wasn't going to attack them. He might be pissed off but he was never going to *hurt* them.

How could Toby ever think that he would?

They were the ones who hurt him. Who'd *been* hurting him for months now.

After a few moments of tense silence Mary got to her feet "I'm sorry Jim, we never meant to hurt you, but we did and I know there's no taking that back, and I promise I won't– none of us will tell anyone about…you,"

"I– I'm sorry to," Claire stammered out "And I won't tell anyone,"

"Jim, I– I– I'm so *so* sorry," Toby was barely able to keep the sob out of his words.

Darci just nodded in agreement with them, eyes wet with barely

restrained tears.

“We….we should go,” Mary said quietly, with that she turned and headed towards the door.

Darci and Claire moved to follow her, Toby doing the same, practically choking on his own guilt.

They needed to give Jim some space, hell space was the very least he deserved from them. After everything they’d done it was no wonder Jim hated them. Toby wouldn’t blame him if he never wanted to see any of their faces ever ag--

A deafening roar echoed from behind them.

Toby, Darci, Claire, and Mary all stopped and whipped around out of sheer instinctive reflex. All of them panicked by the shocking sound, Toby desperately tried to figure out what they could have done to set….Jim….

Jim slapped both hands over his mouth, taking several shaky, frantic steps backwards “No-- I– I’m sorry, it’s not….”

That’s when it clicked in Toby’s mind.

That hadn’t been a roar. That had been Jim shouting the word ‘No’.

Jim deflated, both hands falling limp at his sides, head lolling down until his horns were pointing straight up. Every trace of anger from

just seconds ago gone in an instant.

“Please don’t go,” he whispered.

Toby and the girls stayed rooted to the floor, glancing back and forth between Jim and each other uncertainly. Right now Toby *really* didn’t know what to make of Jim’s behavior. He’d gone from screaming at them to get lost to begging them to stay in a matter of seconds.

Were mood swings part of Jim’s transformation? Because he was acting pretty mood swingy. But even so, why would he want anything to do with them after everything that they….

He glanced over at the girls for help. Darci and Claire looked just as lost as he felt, out of the four of them Mary was the only one holding steady. She caught each of their eyes and gestured back towards the living room with a sharp jerk of her head.

Toby took the hint “Ok, not leaving,” they all turned and moved back towards the couch, reseating themselves on it. Jim hadn’t looked up the entire time, breathing sharp and shallow and his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

“Are...you mad at us?” Mary asked gently “Totally cool if you are, I mean we freaking deserve it, I’m just trying to figure this out,”

“I...I’m mad, I’m mad and scared and tired--” the words all came out in a rush before Jim had to stop to take a breath “But….I want you to stay,”

Toby tugged at the bottom of his sweater vest, maybe he should wait

till they were all calmer to ask this, but they needed to get some things clear ASAP.

“Are we still your friends?” Toby said bluntly “If we’re not just say the word, but we need to know where we are on this,”

His horns shot back as Jim snapped his head up, angular features twisting with equal parts shock, horror, and disbelief “Y– yes you are, but are you– even with…” he stammered, words coming out in an incoherent jumble.

“Take your time,” Claire folded her hands in her lap “We’ll stay as long as you want,”

Jim's face fell, a look of utter defeat washing over them, weakly raising a hand to point at himself “Do you still want to….with me--even with me being….this?”

Seeing Jim gesturing to himself while staring at them like a kicked puppy Toby’s gut twisted so painfully he thought he might puke.

Well if he didn’t feel guilty before he sure as shit did now.

Did Jim think that they’d ditch him if they knew he changed into….whatever this was? Did he really think they were that shallow?

Then again, when they’d first seen him like this their knee jerk response was to scream and start freaking out. And it had taken all of an hour after Toby learned about Jim’s shapeshifting for him to blow up at Jim about it.

His belly gave another painful twist as he thought back on his reaction to the past few minutes.

And all it had taken was a minute of yelling, well deserved yelling in fact, for Toby to throw out everything from the past ten years and start wondering if Jim was about to attack them.

No wonder he didn't tell them.

Toby swallowed hard to force down the bile rising in his throat.

And Jim's other worries…if had told them, or anyone for that matter, about this and they reacted even worse….

All it would take was one phone call to the wrong person and it was game over for Jim, he didn't get any second chances with this.

And over the last few months, the way they'd all acted like pushy jerks, how Jim had shut down every time they tried to find out what was really going on with him….

Maybe back before everything went to hell they would have handled learning about Jim being a were-gargoyle just fine. But it was still a pretty high stakes gamble on Jim's part. And after…..no freaking wonder Jim didn't tell them anything after they'd called CPS and lied to his face about it..

Of course Jim didn't feel safe sharing *any* of this with them.

After all the shit they'd done Toby wouldn't blame Jim for telling them all to get out and not come back. But for some reason Jim still wanted them around, in spite of everything they'd done.

Unexpected emotion swelled, Toby tightening his grip in his sweater as his eyes burned.

Whether or not Toby deserved it, Jim still wanted to be with him. That meant it was up to Toby to make it up to him, for everything, starting now.

"Of course we do Jimbo,"

"Definitely," Darci sat up straight.

"For sure," Claire said with a nod.

"No way are we ditching you," Mary squared her shoulders and folded her arms "Just because you turn blue, sprout horns, and shoot up six feet when the sun goes down doesn't mean we're ditching you,"

Despite the fact he was over six feet Jim had never looked so small "You…you're sure?"

Toby fought back another wave of burning emotion behind his eyes "Same answer, we're here for you as long as you want us to be,"

“And…the lying?”

Mary waved him off “If this doesn’t count as a good reason to lie I don’t know what does,”

“Mary’s right,” Claire added “This was your secret to tell and we didn’t have any right to it, we never should have pried into the things the way we did, but if you want us we’re here for you,”

Jim looked like he was about to cry or melt into a puddle, or maybe both.

“Actually I-- I need to say something,”

Everyone in the room pivoted towards Darci. She flushed at all the eyes on her but didn’t back down.

“Jim, I know we did a lot of screwed up things, we hurt you and put you in a lot of danger, I’m not trying to say that we didn’t-- but….” she chewed on her lip, squirming “I was scared that one day I was going to wake up and learn that you were dead. I was scared that one day your mom was going to kill you. I know that’s not true now, and I’m not saying you had to tell us about all… this, but…”

She turned her gaze up, wavering for a brief moment before powering through “But there are claw marks on your basement door and scars on your ankle and you weren’t telling us anything. What were we supposed to think?”

Heavy, suffocating silence pressed down on them.

Claire leaned over towards her “Darc I really don’t think–”

“No.” Jim plopped back down in his seat, face curdled into a deep wince “You– you’re right, I…I’m sorry, I just….I just didn’t know what to say,”

Toby fidgeted uncomfortably. They *had* been worried for months, but Jim had reasons to be scared to. He tried and failed to think of a way this could have ended better. Would Jim have been able to reassure them without spilling the beans? Would they have let this go without getting to the bottom of things?

The more he thought about it the more he realized the answer was no. They were always going to keep at it until they knew Jim was safe, and Jim was always going to do whatever he could to keep his secret.

They all should have done a lot of things differently, handled everything so much better, but this was always going to end in a big, ugly way.

“Ok but you definitely had a lot of *really* good reasons for not speaking up,” Mary said hastily “I mean, it’s not like we were acting super trustworthy,”

“And us being worried about you doesn’t make all the lying and breaking and entering we did ok,” Toby added.

“Yeah but…..” Jim’s voice was soft “You guys were scared to…and I just let you be scared,”

Things were quiet for a few moments before Claire cleared her throat "Ok I think we all screwed up here, not equally, the four of us definitely screwed up a *lot* more,"

Darci, Mary, and Toby all nodded enthusiastically at that.

"But...I think we all did things we shouldn't have, and if we're going to go forward we need to do things better,"

"Agreed," Mary said firmly.

"Absolutely," Darci added.

Toby saw Jim raise his head, and even though his face was so much different now, Toby could see the emotions playing out on his face crystal clear. Watching Jim cycle through fear and doubt and uncertainty, until Toby finally saw the flicker of hope behind his eyes.

He'd been letting Jim down for a long time, for a lot longer than he'd realized. Toby couldn't let Jim down now, not anymore.

"I'm right there with you guys," Toby pushed himself up straight, head held high "We can't lie and sneak around each other any more, we all need to find a better way to do things,"

Chapter End Notes

Jim's heel turn from being furious at his friends to begging them to stay might seem pretty jarring. But keep in mind two things

1. Right now Jim is 66% emotion, 33% bottled up troll instincts,

and 1% rational thought. He is not using his head right now.

2. Jim is a lot more lonely than he is angry at them.

After months of bottling up his emotions and suffering in silence, Jim finally got to unload on the other kids exactly how they hurt him and how that made him feel. And when he did their response was "We're sorry, we hurt you and we know that an apology is not going to erase the harm we caused, we're prepared to give you as much distance as you need".

When Mary said that they should go and they all made to leave, their thinking was "This is an incredibly strained situation, we should give Jim space right now and not intrude any more than we already have" but the first thing that popped into Jim's mind was "Them leaving right now means they that they are permanently rejecting you and your monster form and you will be alone forever". Hence why he shifted gears to begging them to stay so quickly.

Jim is willing to let Darci, Mary, Toby, and Claire back into his life more quickly than a lot of people would. But Jim isn't most people, he's had more than enough distance and isolation for an entire lifetime in the past few months, to say nothing of the ten years before that. And aside from the four of them, Jim's only other option would be to go find other people who he knows and trusts less and try to make friends with them, which is a bad idea for multiple reasons. So for Jim it's very much a matter of his old friends or no friends at all.

Now that being said, Toby, Claire, Darci and Mary definitely understand that even though they apologized, the damage is still done and the hurt is still there. And they aren't going to take advantage of the fact that Jim's letting them back into his life so early to try and get out of the work of improving their behavior and repairing their relationship. They know they did wrong, and they are willing to put in the effort needed to make up for it.

Mary

Chapter Notes

> Big thank you to featherdancer and earth-ambassador-jim on tumblr, they were a big help with a lot of the scenes in this chapter and the next few ones ones where Jim explains his troll form to the other kids.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as Toby finished speaking the conversation died down. The pause stretching out longer and longer as no one could seem to figure out what to say. Mary dragged her fingernails against her jeans, squirming under the weight of the heavy, uncomfortable silence.

The five of them may be back on solid ground, but there was still a *lot* they had to talk about, and no one wanted to be the one to speak up first, Mary included.

Mostly because of her own guilty conscience.

Despite the fact that they'd thrown him and his mom under the bus– actually it probably would have been better if they'd *literally* thrown them under a bus, Jim hadn't told them all to get lost. In fact he'd pretty much begged them to stay with him. Who did that?

Mary swallowed, trying to dissipate some of the tightness in her throat.

Like she didn't damn well know already.

People who were so scared of being alone that they chose crap friends over no friends. People who didn't think they could ever have any

better than what they had.

People who were *desperately* lonely.

That's who.

Another wave of guilt crashed over her, face hot and gut heavy.

They'd been awful to Jim for months, and she didn't have the luxury of being able to hide under a rock and wallow in self pity. Jim was scared and lonely, and despite the fact that they were the ones who put him in that position, now they were the only ones who could get him out of it. Despite how garbage they'd been to him, Jim still wanted them around. And while Jim hadn't said as much out loud…

Mary's fingers dug into her knee until they hurt.

It wasn't like Jim could just go out and get new, better friends. Find people he knew and trusted less and hang out with them, until he was forced to pull away when they inevitably started asking what he did at night, starting this whole mess all over again.

For better or worse they were all Jim had.

That meant it was on them to do better.

Mary squashed down the hot ball of shame in her belly and squared her shoulders.

No more making the same crappy choices that had screwed things up so badly to begin with. They needed to start over, rebuild from the ground up, but if they wanted to do that….

She cleared her throat to catch everyone's attention, and when all eyes were on her, Mary spoke up "We screwed up a lot of things, but I think our biggest problems came from how we lied and tried to hide things from each other. Because of that none of us had the information we needed to make good choices," she spoke slowly, making sure each word came out the way she intended "And the kinds of secrets we were keeping…those were big *big* things. We can't lie about stuff like that ever again. That doesn't mean we should have to share every gross little detail that goes on in our lives, but…."

She scrolled her gaze over each person in the room "If we're all going to move forward from this…we can't lie to each other anymore. Ever."

Everyone still looked awkward and uneasy, but they all nodded in agreement.

Mary turned towards Jim and forced herself to look at his eyes and not the gigantic horns sprouting out of his head. This last part could technically apply to all of them, but she was making sure to include it for Jim's sake.

"How about from now on when someone asks about something… private, we just…we just say 'That's private I don't want to talk about it',"

"I agree with that one hundred percent," Claire chimed in "But if we're really worried I think we should say something like 'I know you don't want to talk about this thing, but I'm really worried about you

and I just want to know if you're safe' obviously none of us should pry or snoop around anymore, but I think it's fair to ask for enough information so that we know the other person is safe. Does that sound good?"

Jim nodded curtly "Ok,"

"Sounds good,"

"Works for me,"

For a moment it looked like the conversation would fall back into another lull, then Toby spoke up again.

"So Jim I've been wondering…I know your curfew and everything is because of…this," he held both hands above his head, fingers curled into the approximate shapes of horns "But what about…" his hands dropped into his lap, expression tight and pained.

"What about the basement?"

Everyone in the room froze instantly, Jim going unnaturally still in his chair.

It wasn't like Mary wasn't dying to know the truth behind that particular mystery to, but they'd pushed Jim plenty already tonight, it was entirely reasonable that this was the point where he'd draw the line. But then again…

Along with making space in her brain for the concepts of ‘Magic is real’ and ‘Jim is a wer-something’ Mary’s perception of Dr. Lake had been completely flipped on its head. She wasn’t the one behind all of this. She wasn’t the monster Mary had thought she was for months, she didn’t force Jim to stay in his house all the time, he did it because he had to keep his magical transformation secret.

But the claw marks on the door…those could only have come from Jim being locked down there, and he’d pretty much admitted that’s what happened.

So if Dr. Lake wasn’t an evil witch, and Jim wasn’t locked up all the time, why had she locked him in the basement when he was younger? It didn’t make sense, unless–

Her knuckles went white, fingers digging hard into the denim of her jeans.

Unless there was something else going on they didn’t know about, something huge and complicated that changed everything.

No one said anything; Mary, Darci, Toby, and Claire waiting in expectant silence while Jim sat there, preternaturally still and quiet.

Finally, after nearly a solid minute of silence, he spoke up.

“Mom did put me down there, but she didn’t have a choice. I…..when I was younger…..I….I used to…throw…tantrums, when I was….like this,”

Darci sat up a little straighter “Tantrums?”

“....yeah,”

For a second all Mary could do was stare at him, almost not sure she’d heard right.

Somehow imagining little goody-two-shoes Jimmy Jam throwing temper tantrums was harder than believing that he was a magical shape shifter. And he was sitting right in front of her in all his horny, blue, were-gargoyle glory.

And sure Jim might be bigger like this, but still, getting locked in the basement for throwing a tantrum still seemed pretty excessive.

Mary opened her mouth to ask for more details then stopped. She looked at Jim, *really* looked, saw how he’d started to tremble, how he couldn’t meet any of their eyes–

There was more to this than Jim getting locked up for pitching a fit. A lot more.

Tearing her gaze away from Jim, she glanced around at the others, Claire was stiff and tense as steel wire while Darci and Toby couldn’t sit still. Mary was doing her best to stay composed, but it wasn’t easy given that her intestines were determined to twist themselves into a pretzel.

“You seem pretty chill right now,” Claire said at last.

Mary had to give it to Claire, she was one talented actress.

Jim looked anything *but* chill. His fingers were bent into rigid claws against the arms of his chair, shoulders heaving, breath coming in sharp, shallow pants. Barely restrained panic practically oozing from his pores “It was when I was little, I really was telling the truth when I said I hadn’t been locked down there when I was seven but…”

His head dropped, shoulders hunching in even further, curling in on himself. Mary leaned forward, trying to get a peek at his face. She frowned in concentration, glimpsing his expression through his dark hair.

Did he look…guilty?

“Guys it….it got…” his voice cracked “It got bad,”

Mary couldn’t tear her gaze away from him. The way his hands kept clenching and unclenching, how his breathing kept getting faster and shakier, the way he shrank in on himself like a trapped animal trying to hide. But he wasn’t scared of some hunter coming to get him, he was scared of them, of what they would thi–

A lightbulb went off in her head.

In that instant Mary knew exactly what Jim needed, maybe not in the big picture, but right at this moment.

Jim needed for them to hear exactly how bad it had gotten, and to not freak out, to not run away.

He needed to know that they meant it when they said they were here for him. They needed to prove, with actions not just words, that they'd stick with him even at his worst. That whatever was tearing him up inside wouldn't drive them away.

"You can tell us," Mary said gently "No matter what it is, we're not going anywhere,"

For a second she thought about joking about how nothing he could say could top him literally being a magic shapeshifter, but decided against it.

Jim didn't calm down, but he didn't get any more agitated either. Leaning forward with his knees bent partway up and for a moment it looked like he was about to crouch on top of the chair the way he'd crouched on the dresser. Head drooping down so low his expression was completely hidden.

"Toby," his voice was barely audible "You remember when we were younger, that one Christmas mom fell down the stairs and broke her ribs?"

"Yeah?"

"She….she didn't fall down the stairs…." he choked "….I hit her…."

Stunned silence filled the room. Mary felt her mouth go dry.

Toby's face was deathly pale "….you hit your mom?"

“I-- I wasn’t even trying to, but before I knew it she was lying there and-- and--”

Whatever else Jim was trying to say came out as a strangled groan, unable to make cohesive words while he broke down further and further, meanwhile Mary was still reeling.

Little goody-two-shoes-Jimmy-Jam had *hit* his mom? No way. Jim *adored* his mom, even as a little kid there was no way he would ever…

Five minutes ago Jim had been full on roaring at them, and an hour ago he wrecked his dresser without even trying, and sure Jim might have a good handle on things now, but maybe when he was a little little kid, when emotions ran higher and he was still learning to use his words, maybe one night he’d gotten so worked up that he’d….

Mary knew she should be *doing something* right now, but she could only stare as Jim shook in his chair, completely curled in on himself, feet on the cushion and knees against his chest, gripping the arms so tight the vinyl started to creak under the force. There was no way he was faking this kind of breakdown. And he would never lie or joke about something like this. But still, Jim *hitting* his mom, even as a little kid….and if he was even half as strong as he was now…

Dr. Lake locking him in the basement was still very very *not* ok, but….

Furious, bestial roars, the deafening crack of wood shattering.

This…..this made things a little– a *lot* more complicated.

Jim moved his hands from the chair to his head, he was

hyperventilating now, trembling from head to toe “I really haven’t been put down there since I was seven,” he managed to stammer out “But she had to, I hurt her I…I…I…”

Hearing Jim sound so anguished, so *broken* was enough to snap Mary out of it.

She needed to get a grip, whatever Jim had done as a little kid was water under the bridge. And if he hadn’t lashed out five minutes ago while screaming at them about all the messed up shit they pulled, he wasn’t going to lash out, at least not physically. Mary had promised herself that whatever Jim told them they’d stick by him. Now it was time to put some money where her mouth was.

“It’s ok, it was a long time ago and you were a little kid who didn’t know better. And I know you would never do anything like that now, we’re still here for you,”

“We’ve all done things we’re not proud of as kids,” Claire added “We’d never leave you for something like that,”

“Yeah,” Darci said with a vigorous nod “We’re not leaving just because you did something bad when you didn’t know any better,”

Toby nodded along with her, jaw tight, even as he started to tremble himself “You made one mistake a long time ago, that’s it. I’m not ditching you for that, or anything else,”

Jim went still for a moment, before slowly raising his head. His face was still gaunt and grief stricken, but now Mary was able to see a flicker of relief in his eyes.

As glad as she was to get all the basement nastiness out in the open, this was clearly a *really* sensitive, complicated subject. And letting it out hadn't calmed Jim down at all, if anything it had nearly sent him into a nervous breakdown. Him getting locked in the basement as a kid was still *not* an ok thing. But Jim had said he hadn't been locked down there since he was seven and Mary believed him, and whatever things had been like when he was little, violent outbursts clearly weren't a problem for him anymore. As messed up as it might be, the basement was a thing of the past.

Not to mention Jim could tear apart any door someone tried to put him behind like tissue paper.

Time for a subject change.

"What about the scars on your ankle," Mary queried "How did those happen?"

Less than a second after the words left her mouth it occurred to her that she had picked the one subject that had the possibility of being even *more* difficult for Jim to talk about.

Shit.

Can't take the words back now. Though it would be really really great if she could. This was no doubt a difficult, sensitive subject to; but at least it was a *different* difficult, sensitive subject. Different was better, right?

Jim had gone ramrod straight, arms snapping out to grip the arms of his chair again– and oh yeah this was going to be a tough one to, but at least he didn't look like he was about to completely fall apart any more.

“I…needed to get a rabies shot,” Jim said in a flat monotone “And it would have looked weird if I didn’t have an injury so mom gave me a few cuts, it was a sterile scalpel blade and she made sure to not do any real damage,”

“Hang on…” Toby leaned forward “You *didn’t* get bitten by an animal, correct?”

“…correct,”

“But then why….why did you need to get a rabies shot if you didn’t get bitten?”

Mary’s intestines gave another painful twist as she saw Jim wince, recoiling deeper into his seat. The four of them glancing around at Jim and each other uncomfortably.

So Jim didn’t get bitten, which they were already pretty sure about, but he did need to get a rabies shot, and the cuts were just so people wouldn’t question him getting the shot. But if it wasn’t an animal attack…..

What the heck was he doing that made him need to get a rabies shot?

Several long moments of strained silence passed before Jim spoke up again, barely above a whisper.

“While we were camping….I was out walking in the woods, and then I…I found a dead fox and….” his already gravely voice dropped even

lower “I ate it,”

Mary sat back in her seat while the words sank in, but before she could ask one of the many obvious questions stirred up by that explanation, Claire beat her to the punch.

“So….you need to eat...animals when you’re….like this?”

“No,” the word came out with a jarring amount of force “I get all the meat I need from the store, I only ate the fox because it was dead when I found it. I would never go out and hunt down a—”

“Whoa whoa chill!” Mary held up both hands palms out “So you eat raw meat, that’s totally fine,”

Honestly learning that Jim needed to eat raw meat when he was in his giant, horned, fanged form was one of the least shocking things she’d learned tonight. Granted that scale was very *very* skewed. But she’d seen enough movies with vampires and werewolves that someone who magically sprouted fangs at night needing to eat raw meat tracked pretty well.

“It’s no big deal,” Darci piped up “My aunt Azalea is lactose intolerant and has a bunch of allergies, so she’s basically a carnivore. Her eating tons of meat doesn’t bother me, and it doesn’t bother me that you do it either,”

Jim blinked at them, eyes owlishly wide “Oh, uh…ok,”

“Wait, is this why you have all that weird meat in the freezer outside?” Toby asked “For you to eat at night?”

“Yeah….” Jim’s feet dropped back to the floor, tension in his face smoothing into confused blankness “How do you know about that?”

Heat surged up from beneath her skin until Mary was burning from head to toe and she really hoped she didn’t look as bright red as she felt; her, Toby, Darci, and Claire all simultaneously going stiff in their seats.

Oh this wasn’t going to be good, but honesty went both ways and they owed Jim the truth.

“We-- uuuuhhh…..” Mary tugged at the seam of her jeans “We…broke into your house over spring break,”

“…..you what?”

“It was the day after we had that big blow up in the cafeteria and you….fought with Steve,” Toby said, Jim snapping his gaze over to him “You and your mom had left for spring break already and I– *we* were worried about you, I thought that we could find evidence in your house I could figure out a way to help you. But me being scared for you doesn’t make it ok to break into your house and go through all your stuff. That was messed up, and I’m sorry,”

“We all are,” Claire interjected “We all chose to break in and we’re all guilty, and I'm so sorry for what we did,”

“I’m sorry,”

“Sorry,”

Jim pulled in a deep breath through his nose and pressed his palms together in front of him “So tonight was the second time you guys broke into my house?”

Mary swallowed hard and nodded, actions mirrored by the others around her.

“Ok then,” he stared evenly at them, expression unnervingly calm “Anything else I should know?”

If Mary’s face got any hotter she was going to burst into flames right then and there.

Honesty went both ways. Time to suck it up and fess up.

“We eavesdropped on Toby and Mr S after your freakout last September,”

“We spied on you when CPS came over,”

“When we broke in we also found the box in your attic with the teeth and hair and the weird book,”

Jim shut his eyes and sucked in another deep breath, it was actually kind of unsettling how calm he was being about this, Mary almost would have preferred the roaring and yelling.

“Did you look at the book?” Jim asked, voice dead calm and ice cold.

Toby squirmed “Uh…no? It was locked and we couldn’t–”

Jim stood “I’ll go get it,”

Mary shot to her feet and frantically gestured for him to stop “You don’t have to show us if you--”

“It’s ok, it’s nothing super private, and…” Jim ran a shaky hand through his hair “And it’ll make a lot of stuff….easier to explain,”

Ok if he changed his mind she still wasn’t going to push, but now Mary was absolutely *dying* to know what was in that book.

Jim turned and headed up the stairs, Mary watching him go up, and then staring at the ceiling as shuffling sounds came from above her. Less than a minute later, Jim was tromping back down the stairs.

The locked book in his hands.

Walking up to them, he dialed in a number on the lock, popping it open with a click, and after only a flicker of hesitation, held it out.

Maybe the polite thing to do in this situation was to decline, or ask again if he was really sure about sharing this, but with Jim literally handing them the unlocked book, Mary couldn’t control her curiosity.

Willing herself to move slowly and not to just snatch the book out of Jim's hands, Mary reached out and gently accepted it. Plopping back onto the couch and flipping it open to a random page in the middle, Claire, Darci, and Toby pulling in close beside her to see.

She came face to face with a polaroid of Jim's smiling, fanged face, but with longer hair, shorter horns, and one of his lower teeth– tusks? Missing. Written underneath in black pen was a date and the caption 'Jim loses his last baby tooth'.

Whatever Mary had been expecting from the mysterious attic book, this wasn't it. Intrigued, she turned the page, finding more pictures, all polaroids, most of them were of Jim but there was one of Dr. Lake standing in the kitchen holding a sheet cake with the caption 'Happy Birthday Mom!' Flipping a few pages ahead Mary saw the trend continue. More polaroid pictures, most of Jim but plenty of Dr. Lake mixed in. Some were even taken outdoors–

Because they took them while camping, and they went camping because the only time Jim could safely be outdoors was when he was miles away from anyone else.

She kept reading. Based on the dates these photos had been taken about four years ago, when Jim would have been ten to elevenish, and progressed chronologically. Grabbing a chunk of pages, Mary rifled through them until she reached the most recent photos. The last one had been taken only four months ago. Jim, looking the exact same as he was right now, pushing six feet with large, curling horns; sitting on the couch holding a noisemaker captioned 'Happy New Year'.

Her fingers traced over the black ink beneath the photo. This picture would have been taken on New Years eve last year, just hours before they came over to play cards against humanity, when they saw…

In some far off corner of her mind Mary was faintly aware of her shoulders hitting the couch as she slumped back, hands falling away from the book, allowing the others to reach over and flip through the pages themselves.

All this time, the whole time she'd known him– for years and years before that, Jim had been living this secret double life that no one knew about.

Jim had said as much to them in the very loud, one sided conversation they'd had earlier, but it was only now just starting to really hit her.

Going back to the book, it seemed ordinary enough, looked like just a regular family photo album, aside from the big blue elephant in the room. But then why were all the pictures pol–

Her breath hitched.

So they wouldn't have to be developed.

That's why it was locked up and hidden to. Even just a regular family photo album could be dangerous for Jim if the wrong person saw it.

The tight, pinching feeling in her belly returned with vengeance.

"So…" Mary forced her tone to be light "Are these…all pictures of you...at night?"

"Yep," Jim said with a pop, which was strangely still possible despite

his massive tusks “Mom started taking them to keep track of how I was growing, but later on we just started throwing regular pictures in there to,”

Claire nudged her with an elbow “Flip back to the earlier ones,”

Mary was all too happy to comply, grabbing the cover and turning back to the very beginning of the book.

All the pictures on the first page looked purely clinical; missing the relaxed, casual mood of the later photos. Each one was of Jim standing in front of the staircase with a yardstick next to him. He was still ‘blue’, but he was a lot shorter, Mary could tell because of the yardstick, with a babyish roundness to his features, and if he had horns they were hidden under his hair.

Leaning in closer, Mary inspected the caption under the first picture, rereading it five times just to make sure she got it right.

When the first photo was taken Jim would have been five.

Five years old, blue with fangs and maybe horns to.

Jim was fifteen now.

Ten years.

Ten years of *this*.

“So…” Mary tried to to make the question sound casual, but given the circumstances that was pretty much impossible "Did this start… happening when you…turned five?"

Jim, looked away, but not before she saw his face turn gaunt, stuffing both hands into his pockets and hunching in on himself "It was actually…a little over a month after,"

Her heartbeat stuttered. Ever since she’d first seen him like this, even underneath the knee jerk confusion and panic, Mary had wondered what exactly had happened to Jim. About what could possibly cause *this* . They’d already concluded that what made Jim change every sunrise and sunset was magic, because what else could it be? But what had started the cycle in the first place? People didn’t just start shape shifting out of the blue, and the way Jim was talking it definitely sounded like there was some kind of triggering event, but what could possibly cause….this? Whatever had happened to Jim, Mary guessed it wasn’t just getting hit by a cloud of magic sparkles, and she really hoped that it hadn't been…bloody.

She craned her head over, trying to catch Jim’s eye. He hadn’t moved; partly turned away from them and both hands balled in his pockets. Tensing all the way back up again

Mary took one more big breath to steel herself. She’d been hoping Jim would bring it up with no prompting from any of them, but it looked like she was going to have to say it.

“What….” she tried to make the question come out as delicate as possible “What exactly happened to you? What caused…this?”

Jim's gaze didn't leave the floor, a sharp flinch the only sign that he

heard them, not saying anything as another tense pause filled the room.

“It was a bath bomb,” he said at last.

The four of them sat there in silence, processing Jim’s words. The gears were still turning in Mary’s head when all of a sudden two wires clicked in her brain.

“You mean one of the bath bombs from the box upstairs?”

Mary didn’t register Jim moving at all, one second he was standing a few feet away from them, head down and shoulders hunched, the next his face was inches away from hers, sending Mary whipping back in surprise.

“You know about those!?”

“Yeah,” Claire said uneasily, peeling herself off the back of the couch “We saw them when we br–,”

“ *Tell me you didn’t use any!* ”

All four of them jerked back, Mary's heart leaping up into her throat. The way Jim had raged at them minutes before, making furious snarls and barks that no human should have been capable of, fresh in her mind.

But right now Jim didn’t look angry.

He looked…terrified.

Then in an instant the terror was gone from his expression and horror was in its place.

“No– no– I’m sorry,” Jim staggered back “I’m sorry I…I…”

Mary fought to keep her breath even, still reeling from the emotional whiplash.

If she hadn’t been sure before she was now, Jim was definitely mood swinging, either as part of his transformation or from the stress of the situation. They needed to get him back on steady ground before he swung back around to anger.

“We tried one, but nothing happened, it just fizzed and turned pink a bit,”

“And smelled like roses,” Toby added.

Just like that the tension left Jim, letting out a deep, shuddering breath and sagging on his feet like a puppet with the strings cut “Ok….ok,”

He let out several more shaky breaths before pulling himself upright “Some of the bath bombs are normal, but do not touch *any* of the rest,”

“Ok then….” Toby drummed his fingers against the arm of the sofa “I take it the bath bomb that….changed you was….different from the others?”

“I guess you could say that,” Jim muttered bitterly.

Not taking her eyes off him, Mary slowly set the book down on the coffee table in front of her “How did it-- and feel free to tell me to shut up, we don’t have to talk about it if this is too personal, but how did it– the bath bomb….change you?”

Jim peeked over at her, the ghost of something deeply pained crossing his face “It didn’t hurt, and it wasn’t…graphic, but I was really little and I don’t remember it too well….are you ok with waiting until mom comes back and she can explain it better?”

Mary bobbed her head up and down “Sure, we can do that,”

She’d spent months wondering what was really going on with Jim, she could wait a few more hours for this. And besides, one thing that had been well and truly hammered into her by now was that there was a time and place for pushing and this was *not* it.

Sure they hadn’t exactly planned on coming clean to Dr. Lake tonight, but they were going to have to do that eventually, might as well take care of it now. Not to mention they owed her a big fat apology to.

Claire nodded along with her “That’s cool we can wait,”

“Definitely, we can wait as long as you want,”

“Yeah, no rush,”

“Ok then,” Jim plopped back down in the chair across from them. Semicomfortable silence settling over the room.

As the quiet stretched on, Mary’s teeth slowly but surely started to dig into her lower lip. She *really* didn’t want to risk pushing Jim back to being angry by asking more questions right now, but his mom wouldn’t be back for…six hours…and that was a lot of time to sit in only partially comfortable silence. Maybe she should put a movie on, it wouldn’t make anything less awkward, but it would still be better than ju–

“Hey Jim,” Toby spoke up, startling her “Since it’ll be a while until your mom gets back, you mind making some snacks?”

Jim jolted a little bit in his seat “Oh….ok, I guess I can do that,”

He stood and headed into the kitchen– and Mary still managed to be shocked by how *tall* he was now, even if you didn’t count the horns.

From beside her she could hear Claire lean over and hiss “What the heck TP? Jim is on edge enough and you’re asking him to make us dinner!?”

“Cooking mellows him out,” Toby hissed back “This should help him relax a bit,”

Mary was so caught up between watching Jim and listening to them

that she almost didn't hear Darci speak up.

"Hey Jim?"

A pair of horns followed by dark hair and a blue fanged face poked out of the kitchen "Yeah?"

Darci flashed him a bright smile "Would you like us to help you or would you rather do your cooking by yourself?"

Jim opened and shut his mouth several times before answering "You guys can help….I guess,"

"Awesome," Darci stood and started walking towards the kitchen.

Mary shared a quick look with Toby and Claire, before all three of them timidly shuffled to their feet and followed Darci.

She could definitely see Jim wanting some time by himself right now, but given how his reaction to them trying to give him space earlier was to start begging them not to leave….maybe he could use some bonding time right now.

Ok, Jim had said he was good with their help, and maybe he'd like having them around, But he was still pretty on edge right now, and needed a break from all the prying personal questions and a chance to wind down a bit. So she needed to make sure they didn't add to his stress. At all.

Out of the five of them Jim was the best at cooking, and Mary knew how frustrating it was to try to get something done when you were working with people who had no idea what they were doing. So follow Jim's instructions, don't get in the way, and if it looked like Jim was starting to mood swing again, excuse herself and drag everyone else out with her.

As she followed Claire and Toby through the door, Mary spotted Jim getting out several large bowls and a saucepan. Glancing at them from the corner of his eye as they came in.

"So, uh….cream puffs sound ok to you guys?"

They all nodded and made sounds of affirmation.

"Ok then, can one of you get me two sticks of butter?"

"I'll do it!" Mary hurried to the fridge, opening it and starting the hunt for the butter while Jim delegated out other tasks to the rest of them. It took longer than she expected to find, being buried behind a bag of brussel sprouts, but soon she had the butter in hand and was heading over to the stove where Jim was standing with the saucepan.

"Here you are, two sticks as ordered,"

"Thanks," Jim took the butter from her, Mary watching intently as he unwrapped it and dropped it the pan.

There was something uncanny about seeing Jim handle the pots and pans, the way he measured ingredients into containers dwarfed by his size without the slightest bit of difficulty was eerily fascinating. The

practiced ease that he handled small, fragile cooking instruments more proof of just how many years of practice he had.

Mary was just about to ask if he wanted her to throw the wrappers away for him, but before she could get a word out Jim popped the greasy papers into his mouth and started chewing.

Her jaw dropped open as she watched him chew and swallow the papers, and it took less than a second for Jim to notice her bug eyed staring. He winced, turning away shamefaced.

Cheeks burning, Mary snapped her mouth shut. Things were weird enough already, she could *not* be making Jim feel even worse than he already was for doing something, admittedly bizarre, but completely harmless.

“So….” she squeezed her voice into something calm and casual, not letting a drop of her inner turmoil escape “You eat butter wrappers?”

Jim, still looking mortified, nodded slowly.

That was…somehow even weirder than the raw meat eating, raw meat still fell into the category of ‘food’ and more or less made sense with the shape shifting and fangs and everything, but butter wrappers…did not. But that was just one more thing on a very long list of things Mary needed to figure out how to be chill about “What do they taste like?”

The question caught Jim off guard, leaving him fumbling for words, but at least he didn’t look embarrassed and ashamed any more “The closest thing would be potato chips, but not crunchy, does that make sense?”

It didn't, but Mary still nodded along like it did.

"So wait…." Darci set the salt down on the counter next to the stove "Is that what you do with your recycling to? You eat it?"

Jim squirmed and looked away "…..yeah,"

Darci gave a small grin "That's pretty neat,"

"You…. think so?"

"Totally," Toby came up to them carrying the flour bin, Claire right on his heels with the sugar "Do milk jugs taste better or worse than aluminum cans? Ooh– what about water bottles?"

For a moment Jim didn't respond, face blank and eyes wide. Then a smile, a fragile watery one but the first *real* smile she'd seen from Jim months, slowly spread across his face "Well for starters not all plastics taste the same…."

Mary felt the corners of her mouth curl upwards into a soft smile of her own, a pleasant warmth tingling to life in her chest. Things between the five of them still weren't ok, not even close. But they'd dragged all the ugly, painful secrets that had torn them apart in the first place out into the open. Just knowing about them wouldn't make them go away, but now they could finally *finally* deal with issues that had been rotting beneath the surface for a long time.

Everything wasn't going to be fixed with one conversation and an 'I'm

sorry’ but even now it was getting better.

Chapter End Notes

Jim: Once my friends learn about me eating raw meat they're going to realize how inhuman I am, what a monster I really am deep down.

The other kids: Eating raw meat? I've seen plenty of werewolf/vampire movies so yeah that checks out.

The kids have started to rebuild their friendship, and Jim is starting to think that he might not be alone forever. By clearing the air and owning up to all their mistakes, the kids are able to rebuild their friendship on a much stronger foundation. But while the missteps they took trying to 'help' Jim were all brought up and addressed, Jim's had problems that go back to way before any of that. He's struggled with deep self loathing and massive insecurities, specifically regarding his troll form, for years; and that's not going to disappear overnight. So Jim has started on his road to a much better place mentally (and there won't be any major setbacks or steps backwards for him) but he still has a long way to go.

Next time: Barbara really doesn't want to be dealing with all this right after getting off work, but at least there's cream puffs.

Barbara

Chapter Notes

Got some super sweet fanart by Paw_Pie here

More fanart of my fics and other TOA fics is on my tumblr under the tag "fanfic art"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barbara tapped the brake, easing the car to a gentle stop in the driveway, reflexively shifting the gear into park. Actions so engrained doing them was as automatic as breathing. Only when the engine was dead and the brake set did she allow herself to slump back in her seat and let out a deep, shuddering breath.

Work…hadn't been great, but it could have been a lot worse. Jenkins still wouldn't say two words to her that weren't work related, but Miranda had stopped staring her down with that disappointed, judgemental look, that was an improvement.

At least that's what she was telling herself.

In any case she couldn't just sit there in the car all night. Shaking off the fog of gloom, Barbara dragged herself out of the car, grabbed her bags, and trudged towards the front door.

Doing her best not to think about the fact that she had to do this all again tomorrow.

She was exhausted all the way down to her bones, the massive weight of it all crushing down on her.

CPS was still breathing down their necks. Everyone already thought she was an abusive monster. And one whiff of trouble, one hint that something might be wrong, was all it would take for Jim to be taken away, and from there it was only a matter of time until someone *saw* him–

Never before had they been so close to losing everything.

Things weren't completely hopeless. They still had their health, the house, a decent chunk of money in savings. Barbara still had her job– a good job with great benefits.

But she had lost her coworkers' trust, they would probably never look at her the same way again. And keeping up the 'everything's fine' act was hard enough without dealing with their stares.

Never in her life had she felt more alone, or more powerless.

Every day it was harder and harder just to get out of bed in the morning, to slap on a happy face and keep putting one foot in front of another. And Jim–

Burning surged up her throat and behind her eyes.

Excessive sleeping, losing interest in his favorite activities, lack of appetite, withdrawing from people around him….

Barbara didn't have to be Board certified in Emergency Medicine to know what depression looked like.

As stressful as this all was for her, she knew it must be even worse for Jim.

And there wasn't a dang thing she could do to help him.

It wasn't like she could tell Jim things weren't as bad as they seemed, not only would that completely invalidate his feelings, it would plain and simple be a bald faced lie.

Barbara saw her hand shaking as she put her key into the lock, whether from anxiety or helpless fury she had no idea. These days it was a pretty even toss up between the two

Despite her best efforts to keep her expectations reasonable, Barbara found herself putting more and more hope on the Salem trip. She knew she was putting all her eggs in one basket and there was a good chance she was only setting them both up for even more heartbreak and disappointment. But Barbara just couldn't stop herself from clinging to the idea that somehow all of this was fixable, that one day they'd be free. That one day she and Jim wouldn't be living in fear.

And she wasn't ready to admit to herself that such a thing may never happen.

Schooling her face into a neutral expression, Barbara stepped inside and shut the door behind her. The trip she was investing so much in was still a month off, and maybe it would give them answers and maybe it wouldn't. But it was still something they had to do. And until then she had to keep grinding away. No matter how hard it was she had to keep going. At least today was ov--

"Mom?"

Barbara paused midstep “Yes?”

Jim poked his head out of the living room, taking a few cautious steps towards her “Hi, was work….ok?”

She frowned but nodded in response “Yes work was fine,”

“That’s good, here let me take your lunchbox,”

Still frowning, Barbara nonetheless held out her lunch cooler. Watching Jim closely as he took it and darted into the kitchen, not taking her eyes off him as she hung her purse from the railing.

Something was off, Jim would normally greet her when he was awake when she came home, but his typical greeting was a quick ‘Hello’, not something this…formal.

“Is everything ok?”

Jim winced and slunk back towards her “Actually….I have something to tell you,”

“Ok then, I’m all ears,”

“Actually…..I think you should sit down first,”

Her heart stopped. If she hadn't hung up her bags she would have dropped them.

Barbara was a doctor, an emergency room doctor at that. She knew firsthand that when someone requested that you sit down before sharing news whatever they had to say wasn't good at all.

"Jim…." a tremor entered her voice "What happened?"

"I'll tell you, but just-- sit down, please?"

Numbly, Barbara followed him into the living room and plunked down onto the couch while Jim took a seat in the recliner across from her. An icy chill creeping out from her chest and spreading across her entire body, sharpening her senses into painful hyper awareness.

Jim certainly looked on edge; fidgeting in his seat, biting his lip and drumming his fingers against his knee, but not outright panicked. Whatever he had to say wasn't good, but it likely wasn't immediately pressing. In fact if there had been an emergency while she was gone Jim wouldn't even be here, he'd be hiding in the woods. So bad news, but not an emergency.

But just because whatever he had to say wasn't immediately pressing didn't mean it couldn't be very *very* bad.

"Ok, lay it on me kiddo,"

Jim swallowed hard "So…you remember Toby; and Darci, Mary, and Claire?"

“Yes, I remember your friends,” granted Jim had stopped talking to them ever since he’d learned that they were the ones who called CPS, but it hadn’t been so long that Barbara had forgotten their names.

“They…..” Jim tore his gaze away from her, rocking back and forth, fingers curled into tight claws around his knees “They uh….”

Barbara could barely hear him over her heartbeat booming in her ears. Something cold and slimy squirming deep inside her belly.

Why did Jim look so nervous? Why had he brought up his friends if he hadn’t spoken to them in weeks? What exactly was he trying to tell her?

And just how bad was it?

“Jim,” she was only partially successful in keeping her voice from shaking “What’s going on?”

He gave a sharp flinch then all the words came out in a rush “Theybrokeintothehouseandsawmelikethis,”

The bottom dropped out of her stomach, Barbara couldn’t feel her arms and legs, the chill in her veins overpowering “Jim….can you repeat that?”

His face twisted in a deep grimace, teeth gnashing against his upper lip as he shrunk under her scrutiny “They….broke into the house….and saw me….like this,”

Barbara was completely cold all over now, the only thing preventing her from completely falling apart was her years of practice. But the composure was only skin deep. There was a roaring in her ears and she could feel herself start to tremble.

Someone knew. Someone had *seen* .

It was their worst nightmare come true.

Jim was one phone call from being taken away, locked up, *hunted like an an–*

That thought was enough to snap her out of it. Barbara shot to her feet, sprinting across the room and grabbing Jim the shoulders “It’s going to be ok sweetie, I’ll take care of it. Now did they get any pictures of you?”

“No, they didn’t, they actually–”

“That’s good, it’s just their word against yours,” Barbara released him and hurried over to grab her phone out of her purse “How long ago did they leave? We should still be able to call their parents,”

“Mom,”

“If we threaten to charge them for trespassing that will give us leverage to keep them quiet,”

“Mom,”

She fumbled with her phone, struggling to pull up her contacts with badly shaking fingers “And with any luck we can convince them that they didn’t actually see what they--”

“ *Mom!* ”

She jumped a little at a hand on her shoulder, Jim having stood up and walked over to her while Barbara was too busy panicking to notice.

“Mom, it’s ok,”

His tone was calm and even, deliberately soothing.

Hearing her son trying to calm her down, as if he was the parent and she was the child and not the other way around, sobered her.

Keep it together, it wasn’t enough to be ready and rearing to fight; she had to stay cool, composed, a rock in a storm.

“You’re right, you’re right, just–” Barbara took a deep breath “Tell me exactly what happened, then we’ll make a plan,”

“Actually….” Jim guided her back towards the living room “It went ok,”

Barbara blinked.

She couldn't possibly have heard that correctly.

"...what?"

"Well yeah we were all kind of freaking out at first," Jim have a half hearted shrug "But we calmed down and talked it out,"

The hand holding her phone fell limp to her side.

Over the years, whenever her paranoia flared up especially high, she'd mentally gone over possible back up plans of what they would do if anyone ever actually saw Jim's other form. What she would do next if the worst ever happened. She'd gone over numerous possibilities, from realistic to highly improbable, and come up with at least one way to do damage control in each scenario.

But never once had the idea of them 'talking it out' ever occurred to her.

"You…talked it out?"

"Yeah, things got messy for a little bit," Jim eased her down onto the couch and took a seat beside her "But after a while we all calmed down and they promised they wouldn't tell anyone about…me. Then we sat down and talked about everything that happened in the past few months, and agreed to work on patching things up,"

You could have knocked Barbara over with a feather right then.

The other kids had seen and they'd all just…talked it out? This all sounded too good, too *outrageous* to actually be happening.

It wasn't as though she *wanted* Jim's friends to immediately panic and lash out at him. The fact that they hadn't was a good thing. But for them to react so…so…reasonably…almost didn't seem real.

Barbara raised her head, trying to regain her bearings. That's when she saw something that she'd been too panicked to notice earlier.

"Jim…" she raised a finger to point towards the large tray sitting on the coffee table "What is…"

"Oh! Yeah, I made cream puffs, you can have some if you want,"

Barbara reached over and gingerly picked up a small puff covered in neon pink glaze and bright purple sprinkles "You…made cream puffs?"

Jim gave a sheepish smile, ruffling a hand through his hair "Yeah I started out with just plain ones, but then we decided to experiment with different fillings and flavors,"

She froze, heartbeat stuttering, Jim's words echoing in her skull.

"Sweetie," Barbara said softly "How long ago did your friends leave,"

Jim went stiff, smile instantly falling off his face.

Her ribcage constricted around her lungs, barely leaving her enough room to breath. Barbara slowly placed the pastry back down on the tray.

“They’re still here, aren’t they?”

He nodded, expression tight and apologetic “They’re waiting in my room, I thought it would be better if I got you up to speed first, but they….have some questions, for you,”

Barbara’s heart stopped for the second time tonight.

Jim’s friends. They’d broken into the house and seen his nocturnal form. They hadn’t run screaming or called the police.

But they were still here. They had questions.

For her.

For years she’d made plans and contingencies for every possible scenario of what they would do if Jim’s secret ever got out, but this was the one thing she hadn’t counted on.

Jim got to his feet, nervously tugging at the sleeves of his jacket “We’ll be up in my room...let us know when you’re ready, or if you want to

do this another night, we can totally wait. And have as many cream puffs as you want, we made tons and there's more in the kitchen,"

Barbara managed to nod in acknowledgement as Jim headed upstairs, leaving her alone in the living room.

But not alone, not really, not when there were four teenagers upstairs waiting to pounce as soon as she gave the green light.

The secrecy they'd shrouded themselves in for over a decade had been compromised. Someone else *knew* . The very thing she'd been dreading for over ten years. Now come to pass. Time and time again she'd gone over what she would actually do if something like this ever happened. How she'd handle things, protect Jim, try to keep the situation under control.

But now that it had happened nothing had gone as she expected and her mind was completely blank.

The shock of it all kept pounding into her over and over again, pinning her in place on the couch. She couldn't even think about trying to move her body while her mind was still playing catch up.

But maybe forcing her body into action would jump start her brain.

Eventually, with herculean effort, Barbara dragged herself off the couch and walked into the kitchen. Spotting her cooler on the corner of the counter, she started taking the dirty tupperware out of her lunch bag and loading it into the dishwasher. A mindless task that still allowed her to think.

All of Jim's friends knew. All four of them. Toby, Claire, Mary, and Darci. They all knew. And they were waiting upstairs to ask more. What had Jim told them already? What more could they possibly want to know?

Another wave of dread crashed over her, nearly making Barbara stagger. Forcing her to lean against the counter to brace herself.

What on earth was she going to say? How was she going to make these kids understand how dangerous this was? How was she–

Wait had she been handling this same lid for the last ten minutes?

Barbara shook her head, snapping herself out of the panicked daze and dropping the tupperware lid into the top rack, slamming the dishwasher shut with much more force than was necessary.

She needed to get it together. She couldn't keep the kids waiting all night, but she could make herself a cup of tea to settle her nerves.

Flicking the start switch on the electric kettle, Barbara snagged a tea bag out of the drawer and dropped it into her mug. And Jim hadn't been lying, there were a lot more cream puffs in the kitchen. Every flat surface was covered in plates and cookie sheets brimming with cream puffs, frosted and glazed in every shade of the rainbow.

She snagged three of them and dropped them onto a small plate next to her mug.

Oh what the hell.

Barbara grabbed three more cream puffs to put onto her plate just as the kettle finished. Pouring the steaming water into her mug and carrying both mug and plate back into the living room. Dropping back down into her chair, plate in her lap and warm mug in her hands, Barbara popped a cream puff into her mouth and sat back to think.

Others knew Jim's secret, but it was contained, the people that knew had yet to leave their house or share it with others. And whether or not Jim's secret stayed under wraps depended on what Barbara said to them before they left.

According to Jim they'd panicked a little when they'd first found out, which was…understandable. But based on the amount of cream puffs the five of them had generated they must have calmed down quite a bit. At least enough to make pastries together.

They should be in a fit state to listen. And they weren't stupid, Toby was a sharp young man, and the girls were eqaully bright. They should be more than capable of understanding.

The real question was whether or not Barbara would be able to pull it together enough to have a rational conversation.

Barbara bit down on another puff, barely aware of the chocolatey filling oozing out under her teeth, swirling the remaining tea in her mug.

In theory she could cite exhaustion and delay this conversation for another night. But the longer she put this off the greater the chances of one of the kids breaking their silence. And that was an unacceptable outcome. Besides, right now the only thing that sounded more draining than having this painful conversation with Jim and the

other kids was the idea of prolonging the entire situation.

She eyed the ceiling above her warily.

Just like resetting a bone, the longer she waited the higher the chances were for nasty complications. Best just to bite the bullet and get the job done as soon as possible.

Barbara had done much harder things over the past ten years. She could do this to.

When those kids came down she would do whatever it took to swear them to absolute total secrecy. Jim's safety depended on nothing less. And she would make them understand that.

Her plate was empty. Mug dry save for the soggy tea bag sticking to the side.

No more stalling.

Barbara got to her feet and set her dishes to the side. Then made her way over to the stairs. Butterflies in her stomach and hornets in her skull.

A big breath in, hold for five, breath out for five, repeat.

Keep calm, keep it together. If the kids saw her acting hysterical they'd be less likely to listen to what she had to say. Stuff all her own worries into that clinical shell until the surface was smooth as a

polished pearl.

Time to reset the bone.

“Hey kids,” she called up, satisfied by how calm and steady her voice sounded “I’m ready to talk, come down whenever you’re ready,”

Barbara turned and walked back to her seat on the easy chair, one ear trained on a cluster of footsteps pattering down from the floor above, four light and one heavy. She didn’t turn as the footsteps descended to the main floor, getting louder and louder until they were right behind her. Not so much as twitching in her seat as Darci, Claire, Mary, and Toby all slunk past her, matching guilty looks on their faces, to sit on the couch. Jim hung back, lingering in the entryway just behind Barbara.

“So,” Barbara fixed each of them in turn with an even stare “You four broke in and found out about Jim’s…condition,”

Four sheepish nods.

“I’d assume then that Jim already explained the basics, but now you have more questions for me?”

Four more nods.

“Ok then,” Barbara leaned back and netted her fingers together “I’ll answer your questions, but only if Jim is ok with me sharing the answers, his privacy is more important than your curiosity,”

They already knew the worst of it, there wasn't anything she could tell them that would be more damaging than what they already knew. And it would be good to get all their curiosity out and addressed, that way she could have their undivided attention when it came to impressing the importance of secrecy.

"That's…fair," Toby mumbled, the first one to break their silence.

"Now before you start asking your questions, why don't you start by telling me everything that you already know so far,"

The four of them squirmed, still unable to meet her eyes.

"Jim….changes at sunset and changes back at sunrise, and that's why he can't leave the house at night," Claire spoke up, slowly raising her head "The changing started when he was five, but he didn't say how,"

Her eyes flicked over to where she must be looking at Jim over Barbara's shoulder.

"And Jim told us about…the basement, and how he threw tantrums when he was little, and about the fox on his camping trips and the cuts on his ankle," Darci mumbled, barely audible "We were worried about those, so we asked, and Jim told us,"

It was a darn good thing Barbara took the time to compose herself before the kids came down, just that sentence was enough to give her three separate MI's. Thankfully she managed to show no outward signs of her inner distress.

"Ok then, anything else?"

The four glanced at each other then slowly shook their heads.

“Alright then,” she leaned forward “What do you want to know?”

There were a few moments of silence, then Toby spoke up “We were wondering…how did this...happen? What happened to make Jim–” his eyes flicked over her shoulder “Start...changing?”

Barbara shut her eyes and pulled in a deep breath through her nose.

Well she knew the answer to that at least, but that didn’t mean the answer was a good one.

She turned to glance at Jim over her shoulder, he gave a single nod of confirmation, jaw set and expression resolute. Turning back, Barbara slowly rolled her gaze over all four kids sitting across from her before she opened her mouth.

“Just over ten years ago I bought a package of bath bombs at an estate sale, a few months later, a little over a month after Jim’s fifth birthday, he took a bath with one of them and it….changed him,”

Without even meaning to, Barbara turned back towards Jim again. Who flinched ever so slightly upon meeting her eyes.

“Yeah,” he continued where she had left off “I don’t remember it too well, but I know that as soon as I dropped the bathbomb in the tub the water turned black and everything went dark, next thing I know I was waking up in the woods and I was--” he gestured to himself “This,”

“Wait…” Mary raised an eyebrow “The bath bomb didn’t just change you it…teleported you?”

“Yep, don’t ask me how I don’t remember, and no I don’t have teleportation powers, it only happened the first time I–” his voice cracked “changed…”

Barbara cleared her throat to get the attention back on her “When I went to check on Jim the bathroom was empty, I searched for him everywhere, then when I found him in the woods he was….”

She forced back the sudden tightness in her throat and continued “I took him back home, I was so confused I didn’t know what to think. Then the next morning he changed back to normal, I thought that what had happened to him was only temporary. Then he changed again that night. And that’s been happening ever since,”

She paused to allow her words to settle in, only speaking up when the silence started to turn uneasy “Now any more questions?”

Claire bit her lip, peeking over at Jim again “Was the bathbomb that changed you…different that the other bath bombs?”

Jim hung his head and stuffed his hands into his pockets “I don’t remember,”

Barbara winced at his bitter tone “It was gray, none of the others are, and I think it might have been slightly larger, but otherwise it didn’t stand out,”

She paused again, the four teens fidgeting in their seats, clearly uncomfortable, shooting occasional nervous glances towards her and Jim.

“Where did the bathbomb come from!” Mary blurted out, instantly all eyes in the room were on here, the girl flushing under the scrutiny “I mean…you said you got it at an estate sale, but have you looked into where it came from before that? Not that you–”

“It’s alright,” Barbara cut in, injecting as much patience as she could into her voice “That’s a reasonable question. I bought the bath bomb at an estate sale for a woman named Sarah Good a few months before as part of a large package of bath bombs. I don't know where they came from before that. I used some of the other bath bombs before that night but nothing unusual happened. The rest have been under lock and key ever since. I’ve been researching ever since but I’m still not sure where exactly it came from,”

Barbara hesitated, this next part was a bit off the subject but she may as well give them the full picture “Most recently my search has lead me to Salem Massachusets,”

As soon as the words left her lips all four of them sat bolt upright at attention.

“Oh my god…” Claire gasped “The Salem witch trials…like in The Crucible!”

“That’s right, one of the women convicted and executed in the Salem witch trials was also named Sarah Good. I’ve been researching the possibility of a connection between her and the Sarah Good who owned the bath bomb. Over the summer we’re going to go to Salem to try and find answers there,”

“But what makes you so sure that this Sarah is related to the Salem witch trials Sarah?” Mary asked “I mean it can’t be that rare of a name, so how do you know this isn’t all just a huge coincidence?”

Barbara bit down hard on her lip, enough to taste blood, fingers digging through her scrubs into her knees until they hurt.

Good golly these kids were smart.

“I’m don't,” she said softly “But I’ve been looking for over ten years without finding anything, and this is the only lead we have left,”

The kids all fell quiet at that, faces wide eyed and grave.

Barbara kept her focus on breathing in and out. Hopefully now that, all the questions were out of the way, she could start driving it home just how important it was that they didn’t tell anyone abo--

“I-- I’m sorry,”

Startled, Barbara glanced up sharply to see Toby making eye contact with her for the first time tonight, looking close to tears.

“All of us are,” Darci added, Claire and Mary nodding in agreement

“I thought you were a monster, I called CPS on you,” Toby continued, voice tight and near cracking “But you were doing everything for Jim

and I could have gotten you thrown in jail, I'm so so sor--"

"Don't apologize,"

Everyone in the room jerked in surprise, including Barbara herself,.

From the corner of her eye Barbara could see Jim open his mouth to object. She whipped around and stopped him with a sharp look.

Jim always tried so hard to make things easier on her, to protect her. A habit of his that warmed her heart just as much as it frustrated her. But this was a battle Barbara needed to fight on her own.

Getting to her feet, Barbara strode across the room and placed a hand on Toby's shoulder "You took appropriate action based on the information you had. You were scared and acted with Jim's safety in mind and you should *not* apologize for that,"

Toby, Darci, Mary, and Claire all looked stunned at her words. And although she couldn't see Jim behind her, Barbara had no doubt he was just as shocked. But what surprised her the most was that she meant it, every single word.

True, their attempts to help had been…misguided, but they'd been right in that Jim was suffering and had been doing so for a long time. And calling CPS would have been reasonable in any situation but their own, and Babrara would not condemn them for that.

But instead of relaxing Toby practically shriveled under her touch "That's…that's not all we did,"

Confused, Barbara looked up and saw all four teens in front of her crumpling in on themselves, guilty looks on their faces intensifying.

“What…do you mean?”

“We spied on you when CPS came over,” Claire mumbled.

“And eavesdropped on Jim last fall,” Mary added.

“We lied *about* calling CPS,” Darci muttered.

Barbara was faintly aware of her mouth dropping open, the cold slimy feeling returning to her gut with a vengeance, she whirled around “Jim did you–”

He nodded jerkily, shoulders hunched and mouth pressed into a hard line.

Her hand slipped from Toby’s shoulder, head spinning. She almost didn’t hear Toby start talking again. Almost.

“This is actually the second time we broke into your house,” his head was down, voice low, eyes on the floor “The first time a month ago, that’s when we found the bath bombs and tried one– it was normal, and we broke into the freezer in the garage, and when we broke in tonight we wrecked a window on our way in,”

“We’ll pay you back for it!” Darci piped up.

With what? Your parents’ money?

Barbara pressed her lips together before the venomous words could escape. Calling CPS was one thing; but spying, eavesdropping, *breaking and entering twice!?* No wonder Jim had been so stressed and tormented. No wonder he was completely depressed. These kids had pushed and pushed and *pushed* until Jim was well past his breaking point, violating their privacy and their sense of safety and–

A sniffle startled her, getting a glimpse of Toby hastily wiping his nose, snuffling back tears. All the girls looked equally devastated, or even more so.

She hesitated, jaw working open and shut, her rage flickering.

These were *kids* . Of course they didn’t know how to handle it when their friend was struggling like this. It couldn’t have been easy for them either. Of course they’d let themselves get carried away. They were just children themselves. Children who simply didn’t know any better. She couldn’t hold them to the same standard as herself, or any other adult.

They knew they’d messed up and were complete wrecks over it. They’d apologized and confessed to everything they’d done.

But Barbara was still furious. Her family’s privacy had been repeatedly violated behind her back. Her son had suffered greatly because of it. Because of these fours’ actions both she and Jim were in the most danger they’d ever been in their entire lives.

But they knew they did wrong and they apologized, and it was clear that Jim had already forgiven them.

And at the end of the day the five of them clearly meant a lot for each other and cared about each other deeply.

So as angry as Barbara was there wasn't anything to be gained by holding a grudge.

Christ she really wished that she wasn't doing this on a work night.

Shutting her eyes, Barbara ran through her breathing cycles, only speaking when she was sure her voice would be steady and controlled "Ok then," she leveled her gaze at each of the four in turn, trying to project control and serenity "It sounds like you made some big mistakes and definitely did some things that you shouldn't have. But you were only acting with good intentions, and I don't hold that against you,"

Toby peeked up at her, face a perfect picture of anxiety "Are you sure? I mean, we did some *really* messed up stuff,"

"You understand why what you did was wrong, right?"

He tapped his fingers together, squirming under her stare "We… shouldn't have lied and snooped around, no matter how worried we were,"

"All that did was make things worse," Darci piped up "And it wasn't just wrong, because of what we did Jim couldn't trust us anymore,"

“Plus because we didn’t have all the info the more we interfered the worse we made things,” Mary added.

Claire nodded along with her “Bottom line lying and spying and sneaking around the way we did was not ok, regardless of why we did it,”

“And I promise,” Toby scooted forward towards her “We’ll never *ever* do anything like that ever again,”

The girls all chimed in with similar affirmations as Barbara surveyed each of them with a cool gaze. They hadn’t been acting with ill intent, for all their hamfisted misguided efforts they were just trying to help Jim. They understood what they did wrong

Hearing them say as much out loud made it easier to swallow the burning knot of frustration inside her.

They apologized. They owned their mistakes. Now it was time for Barbara to let her emotions go.

Toby peeked up hesitantly “So are we…cool?”

Barbara smiled down at him “Yes Toby, we’re cool, but I can’t speak for Jim,”

He hurried over to her side “We’re all cool to, we all came clean and talked things out over the last few hours. And…and I lied to,”

Jim trailed off, all five teenagers in the room glancing at each other shamefacedly.

"But we all forgave each other," Jim said, sounding much more confident "And we all still want to be together,"

Barbara reached up to squeeze one of Jim's shoulders, to the best of her ability, he *was* very sturdy "Alright, then we can all move forward from this,"

"Now that we know everything," Claire said, slowly rising from her seat "We can help get CPS off your back,"

"Yeah!" Darci's face lit up "I can talk to my dad, without telling him about–" her eyes briefly flickered over towards Jim "You know, then he can–"

"I'm going to stop you right there," Barbara held up a hand, tone still calm, but *very* firm "I appreciate you all wanting to help and make amends, really I do. But at this point more outside interference is just going to make things worse. I'll take care of everything with CPS,"

"But mom I really thi–"

One look from her stopped Jim midword.

"Dealing with CPS is my problem, I'm more than capable of handling them on my own and I don't want any of you meddling with this, understand?"

Complete silence.

Frowning, Barbara folded her arms in front of her, putting steel into her words “Do you understand?”

After a few more moments of tense silence, mumbles of ‘yes Dr. Lake’ started echoing through the room.

“Good,” Barbara softened her expression and walked back to her seat “Now I need to make sure you four understand just how important it is that you don’t tell *anyone* about what happens to Jim,”

She planted both feet firmly on the floor and netted her fingers together in her lap “All it takes is for one person to get a hint of something suspicious. That could bring someone else to come looking around, and if they see something…you understand how that could be very bad for Jim,”

They way all four of them flinched at her words told Barbara that they most certainly did understand.

“That means no hints, no jokes, no innuendos of any kind. Are we clear?”

“Yep,”

“Crystal,”

“One hundred percent,”

“Definitely,”

Barbara gave a single crisp nod “Good,”

It sounded like they all understood the need for secrecy, more readily than she expected them to. She felt confident that they wouldn’t do anything to put Jim in danger, no matter how–

A startling thought crashed into her like ice water.

Keeping him safe was one thing, but now that the other kids knew they might seeing more of Jim after dark. His appearance was one thing, but what if–

“Jim hon,” despite her best efforts, some tension managed to creep into Barbara’s voice.

“Yeah mom?”

“Do you mind getting the spare blankets? They should be upstairs under my bed,”

The spare blankets were actually down in the basement, but Barbara had caught herself just in time. Now was not the time to send Jim down to the basement, even just for an errand. Besides, it wasn’t really the blankets she needed.

He blinked at her “Oh, ok,”

Jim turned and tromped up the stairs, and as soon as he was out of earshot Barbara rounded back on the other kids.

“Look, it’s clear you all care about Jim regardless of what he looks like, but you need to understand the changes he goes through aren’t just surface level. There are fundamental, physiological differences. When Jim’s like this he has an entirely different set of needs than he does during the day, and he has absolutely no control over them,”

Mary raised an eyebrow “…you mean like how he can eat raw meat and coffee grounds?”

“I– yes like that,” that was a…surprisingly astute example, making her wonder just how much had happened before she got here. In any case Barbara wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Which is why it’s important that when you do see things like that, the best thing to do is just not react, either positively or negatively, treat it like it’s completely normal, because for Jim it is,”

“I get it, it’s kind of like someone who’s diabetic,” Claire perked up in her seat “Don’t make a big deal out of it when they check their blood sugar or give themselves insulin and stuff like that,”

Again Barbara found herself caught off guard by how on point she was “Y– yes exactly,”

She honestly hadn't expected them to catch on this quickly, or to understand so well, it was actually throwing her for a bit of a loop.

Fortunately she was saved from more floundering by Jim coming back downstairs.

"Sorry, I looked but the blankets weren't there,"

"That's ok, I'm sure they're around here somewhere," Barbara turned back towards the other kids "Seeing how it's just after…" she glanced down at her watch "Four am, I'll find the spare blankets and you kids can get some sleep, then once it's light out we can–"

"Actually…." Mary cut her off "Our parents all think we're at a sleepover at Darci's,"

Darci gave a little wave.

"And Darci's dad is working until noon tomorrow, plus we've been up all night, so we were just thinking of hanging out here for another hour or two and then heading back over there as soon as it's light out and crashing at Darci's for the rest of the day,"

Barbara blinked in surprise, startled into silence, how many times that made tonight she'd honestly lost count.

Hearing that they'd come up with a sleepover cover story wasn't altogether too shocking, she'd been young once to. And with how heavy a sleeper Nancy was Toby didn't need to come up with a cover story. But it was a bit disconcerting to hear how thoroughly they'd planned this out. Had staying up for the whole night been part of the

plan from the beginning, or had it just worked out that way? Sure they were young, but even teenagers would have a hard time staying awake all night without…

She raised her head and looked around the room, this time noticing the mugs sitting on the shelves and side tables.

“How much coffee have you all had?”

No one was able to meet her eyes.

Barbara pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled deeply. Normally she’d lecture them on the effects of sleep deprivation and caffeine on developing metabolisms. But right now she was far too tired and had too many other, much more pressing things on her mind.

Her shift had been physically and mentally draining, this conversation even more so. Barbara was exhausted in every sense of the word, and the situation here was well enough in hand that she felt comfortable leaving the kids on their own now.

“Ok then, that sounds fine, but I am tired and I need to go to sleep,”

“Thanks Dr. Lake,”

“Sleep well,”

“Goodnight,”

“I promise we’ll clean everything up,”

Barbara managed to nod in reply as she stood and headed upstairs. Letting out a deep shuddering breath as the noise of the teenagers’ chatter faded behind her.

She’d done what she could to keep the situation under control, and for the most part she thought she’d been successful. The kids knew Jim’s secret, and they’d contributed more to their current situation than Barbara ever could have guessed. But they apologized and genuinely wanted to make amends, and they understood the need for complete secrecy. And Jim’s life would be better for having his friends in it.

It hadn’t been an easy conversation to get through, but Barbara had done it, and she’d managed to stay calm and rational for the whole thing.

But while the surface might be calm, the inside was still writhing and reeling.

The ironclad wall of secrecy they’d shielded themselves with for over a decade had been torn down. Logically she knew Jim was more or less just as safe as he’d been this morning. His friends cared about him, they understood the situation and would never do anything to put him in harm's way. But Barbara’s world had been knocked completely off kilter, and she still hadn’t regained her balance.

Shutting the bedroom door behind her, muting the already muffled sounds from downstairs. She immediately collapsed to the floor, slumping back against the door and forcing herself through her breathing cycles.

It was the only way to keep herself from screaming.

Barbara had held it together in front of the kids, but the burning rush of emotions; fear, disappointment, rage, and so many more she couldn't name, was still roiling just below her skin. Despite all the explanations and reassurances the kids had given her, and the ones she'd given them, none of it did anything to quell the raging storm inside her.

She balled her hand into a fist and shoved as much as she could of it into her mouth, Barbara couldn't trust herself not to start sobbing right now, and she couldn't let Jim hear it if she did.

Jim always tried to protect her; but Barbara was the adult, the parent, the mother, that meant she needed to be the strong one.

No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

I definitely think forgiving the kids is the right move. They did screw up in several very serious ways, but they're kids who literally didn't know any better, and all of their actions came from a place of concern and caring. But even accepting that, Barbara's not letting herself feel the hurt and anger she needs to. Regardless of what the kids' intentions were, Barbara suffered greatly because of their actions and she has a right to her pain. Instead of just saying "It's ok I forgive you" she could say "I understand what you were trying to do and I know that you're sorry and want to make amends for your actions, but you caused me a lot of fear and hurt that I am still healing from. It's going to take some time for me to fully recover, and it will be at least that long until we can call things between us 'ok'".

It's good that Barbara recognizes how important Jim's friends are to his mental health, and wants to support his relationships with them. But the way she's repressing everything is not healthy.

Jim might have broken down a few times already, and he's on his way to recovery, but Barbara still has a ways to go. It's only a matter of time until it's her turn, and Barbara breaks under the burden she's carrying.

Darci

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darci stopped pedaling and slowed to a coast as she rounded the corner, the school coming into view.

The last 36 hours had completely reshaped the world and how she looked at it, and yet here she was, biking to school like everything was normal.

She was almost surprised that the building was still standing.

Saturday night had been...eventful, to say the least. Then at seven in the morning on Sunday things had slowed down, with Toby going home and the three of them heading back to Darci's house and immediately collapsing from exhaustion. They'd gotten a few good hours of sleep in before her dad had woken them up at one in the afternoon and sent Claire and Mary home. The rest of Sunday had been spent in a haze, and one night of restless sleep brought her here.

Monday morning. Heading into school. The foundations of everything she knew and understood about the world completely uprooted.

A wave of vertigo hit her. Darci tightened her grip on her handlebars, struggling to get her equilibrium to get under control.

Keep cool. Don't lose your head.

Slowing to a stop, she pulled her bike up and locked it in, feeling

disconnected from the actions, like she was watching someone else piloting her body.

She knew she shouldn't be working herself up like this, nothing had changed, not really. They'd just learned something about Jim that they hadn't known before. And he was the one who was really struggling here, not her, Darci should be focusing on helping him with this, not on psyching herself out.

But despite her best efforts Darci found herself falling further and further down the rabbit hole.

When she thought about it it didn't seem real. Like something out of an anime or a fantasy novel.

The reason Jim had a super early curfew and could never leave his house at night. The long awaited explanation simultaneously making too much sense and no sense at all. This…this *curse* had been a major part of his life for the past ten years, sometimes unseen but never completely gone. Sending out ripples that affected everything he did.

Jim *changed* , into what he couldn't say, every sunset and changed back every morning.

Shapeshifting, magic, those were real things. Magic was real.

Her heartbeat stuttered.

Magic was *real* .

Darci was so caught up in her thoughts she didn't even realize that she passed her locker until she nearly ran into the end of the hallway. Face hot, she quickly back tracked to her locker, struggling to open the lock with trembling fingers.

Magic was real.

Magic was real and it wasn't something hiding away in far off castles or ancient ruins. It was right here in Arcadia Oaks California; inside regular, ordinary people, like Jim.

If magic curses were real what other things could be real to? Werewolves? Vampires? Fairies?

Three days ago the answer to all three was a solid no. But now everything had changed and nothing was off the table.

And that…scared her.

Her whole life, whenever she'd watched scary movies, or felt nervous about walking down a dark hall at night, she'd been able to tamp down her fears by assuring herself that there was no such thing as monsters. She didn't need to worry about ghosts in the hallway or demons stalking her at night, because demons and ghosts didn't exist.

But now who's to say that they didn't? And who's to say that Darci shouldn't have been afraid of them all along.

Without even thinking about it Darci glanced out the window, the soccer field stretched out alongside the building, sun shining on the wet grass a stark contrast to the shadowy grove of trees that bordered

its far side.

What strange, terrible things were lurking out there?

Shaking her head, Darci picked up the pace and hurried to the classroom. Doing her best to shove the stinging worries out of her head, down from the pit of her stomach all the way to the bottoms of her feet, pushing the door open and heading inside.

Don't think about that right now. Worrying wouldn't change anything so there was no point to working herself up into a panic in the middle of school. Instead of freaking out about things beyond her control, Darci should focus on fixing what she could control.

Aka, patching things up with Jim.

Plunking down into her desk, Darci let out a deep, shuddering exhale. Willing the last of the jitters to leave with her breath.

Don't think about what things could be going bump in the night, don't think about the yawning chasm of possibilities that had opened up at her feet. Just concentrate on fixing her friendships. That was something she could actually control. That's where her focus needed to be right now.

The school day somehow dragged on and rushed by at the same time. First period Spanish by herself, second period Political Science with Mary, third period Language Arts with Claire and Toby. Then finally she was heading to World History, where all five of them would be together again for the first time since Saturday night.

Darci couldn't help but feel a little nervous walking in the room. For the most part she'd been successful at tamping down her fears about their new magical reality by thinking about how to fix things with Jim. But that just meant she traded one set of anxieties for another.

Even after their big talk on Saturday she still wasn't sure where they all stood. Jim might have said he forgave them, but there was a *big* difference between 'forgiven' and 'ok'.

There was still nearly ten minutes of passing period left, she honestly wasn't expecting anyone besides Mr. Strickler to be in the room, so her heartbeat stuttered more than a little bit when she saw that Claire and Jim were already here. Seated in the back corner while Mr. Strickler cleaned off his desk.

Mr. Strickler didn't assign seats unless someone was being a troublemaker, but they all typically had seats that they stuck to out of habit. Claire and Jim were both front row seaters, so sitting in the corner like this had to be for a reason.

Darci managed to unfreeze her feet, walking up to them while giving a jerkly little wave and her best attempt at a smile. Claire nodded at her and mumbled a soft 'hey', Jim didn't say anything, but managed an awkward wave of his own.

Darci shuffled into the desk next to Claire, none of them spoke, they couldn't even make eye contact with each other. Even Mary joining them didn't do anything to shake off the tension. It took Toby coming in to break the silence.

"So…." Toby slid into the desk next to Jim's "How are we all doing?"

The question was phrased to address all of them, but he'd been

pointedly looking at Jim while he said it.

"I-- uh….." Jim floundered and squirmed for a few seconds before letting out a deep sigh and slumping in his seat, head hanging "I don't know."

Darci bit her lip, fingers curling painfully tight around the edge of her desk and shooting a nervous look towards Claire and Mary.

"Okaaaay……" Mary scooted her desk closer to Toby's and Jim's "I know we had a lot of good talk on Saturday, but I think we might need to go over a few more things,"

Jim finched, eyes flicking from side to side "Can we do it later, when we're alone?"

They were *kind of* alone right now. The only one in the room besides the five of them was Mr. Strickler, who was busy cleaning up his desk, but that would change pretty soon. Sure Mr. Strickler might overhear; but even if he did he'd probably think they were talking about a videogame or something. Besides, Mr. Strickler was one of the 'cooler' teachers, as much as the word could be applied to a teacher. If he learned Jim's secret he might be pretty chill, then again magic shapeshifters were way above his pay grade, seeing big blue Jim could very well give him a heart attack.

But Mr. Strickler wasn't going to see Jim like that or find out because Jim didn't want to tell anyone else and he didn't want to talk about it with other people in the room

And they needed to respect that.

Claire nodded “Ok then, how about we talk during lunch?”

Jim opened his mouth but nothing came out, struggling for words and squirming in his seat.

Frowning slightly, Darci leaned towards him over the side of her desk. It seemed like a no brainer to her, they could easily have lunch somewhere no one would overhear them, so why was Jim so on edge? Sure they hadn’t eaten together in we--

“Jim we don’t have to…talk at lunch if you don’t want to,” Darci said softly “We can just have lunch together, like we used to, it doesn’t have to be a big deal,”

As soon as the words left her Jim practically melted in his seat. The look of sheer relief on his face stirring up something painful in her chest.

“Th– thanks,”

Mary gave a crisp nod “Let’s have lunch in City Center Park then, that should give us plenty of privacy, we can decide later whether we want to…talk, or not,”

Toby opened his mouth, getting ready to ask something else, but before he could get a word out the door opened and a bunch of other kids walked in, loudly chatting among themselves and immediately causing the volume level of the room to shoot up.

Class was starting and they’d run out of time, any questions would have to wait until lunch.

The five of them silently shifted in their desks to face forward as everyone else in the room settled into their seats. Predictably, they got a few dirty looks for disrupting the seating status quo, but since the school year was nearly over no one gave them too much grief over it. As everyone settled in Mr Strickler started the projector and took his place at the front of the room.

They'd get through class as usual, then at lunch they'd talk, or they wouldn't. No pushing either way.

A map of Europe came up on the projector. But as much as Darci tried to force herself to pay attention to the lesson, she just couldn't do it, not with everything that was going on.

Darci knew she shouldn't be freaking herself out like this. And having a breakdown during history class wasn't going to accomplish anything. Not to mention Jim was the one who actually had to live with a magic curse, not her. Her own life had not, and would not change at all and she had nothing to complain about.

But she couldn't stop thinking about what else could be out there. What kind of witches and monsters were lurking in plain sight?

Her heartbeat sped up, pulse pounding in her ears.

How could Darci protect herself when she didn't know what was out there?

But Jim might.

She froze in her seat, slowly sitting up straighter as the thought gained more and more traction.

Maybe, being cursed himself, Jim knew more about the supernatural goings on of the world. He hadn't mentioned anything like that on Saturday, but they'd all been pretty stressed and had a *lot* of other things to talk about, so it was understandable that it didn't come up. She could ask him today at lunch.

Things were still rocky between them all, and their talk probably wasn't going to be all sunshine and rainbows. But she just might get some concrete answers.

That thought comforted her more than anything else today.

Feeling more than a little better, Darci was able to calmly sit through the rest of class, and even absorb the second part of the lesson. Twenty minutes later class ended and their lunch period started. Sharing a look, the five of them headed out the room and outside towards the park.

At least everyone else must have felt just as tense as she did, either that or they just didn't feel like making small talk, because no one said a word on the way to the park. Even when they got there they only spoke to place their orders with the British guy who ran the food truck. Standing there in total silence while he prepared their food. Soon enough they were all sitting around a rickety wooden picnic table, untouched lunches in front of them.

The only other people around were food truck guy, busy blasting music while he cleaned his grill, and a woman with a stroller on the opposite side of the park. No one was going to overhear anything they said.

If there was a time to talk it was now.

Still no one said anything, the silence growing thicker and heavier the longer they sat there. Sneaking nervous glances at each other, no one wanting to be the first one to speak up.

Until Claire broke the spell.

She cleared her throat, not loudly, but enough to draw all eyes on her.

“Jim, are you ok to talk about your…condition today, or do you just want to have lunch? And don’t feel like you have to agree to talk, it’s nothing that can’t wait,”

Jim bit his lip and looked down, tugging at the edge of the foil wrapper of his burrito, the rest of them watching at him in expectant silence.

“I guess I’m ok to talk about…some things,”

Apparently that was just the queue Mary was waiting for “Ok so I did a little research,” she whipped out her phone and started tapping and scrolling with her thumbs “You don’t know exactly what it is you turn into, correct?”

“Oh– uh, no, I don’t,”

“I looked into it and I think I've come up with some possibilities,” she quickly glanced from him to her phone and back again “So based on what you look like when– you know, the most likely possibilities I found were minotaur, faun, and satyr, but all the sources I looked said there was only one guy who was a minotaur, so I think we can rule that out. They didn’t say anything about fauns or satyrs turning human during the day, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t, any of these sounding right?”

Jim’s eyes were bulging, jaw working open and shut, an utterly flabbergasted look on his face “I– I’m not sure,”

“I’ve been doing some digging to,” Claire leaned forward, resting her folded arms on the table “Can you tell me a little more about the Sarah Good your mom bought the bath bomb from? Maybe her old address, or her birthday? I think she’s the key to this, and if we find out more about her we can…”

The rest of the sentence died in Claire’s throat.

Jim was now hunched forward, both hands on the table the only thing holding him upright, trembling all over. His entire body shaking with the force of the breaths he was taking, each one more forceful and less controlled than the last.

Claire winced, leaning back and sharing uncomfortable looks with Darci and Toby. Toby himself had his mouth pressed into a firm line, expression unreadable, keeping his eyes locked on Jim as he leaned over to gently nudge Mary with his elbow.

Unfortunately she didn’t take the hint.

“You could also be an Ox-Head, of course those are guardians of the

underworld so it doesn't really fit," Mary's eyes were glued to her phone, which might be why she didn't notice Jim unraveling further and further "There's also Cernunnos, he's the horned Celtic god, they called him the lord of the wild, I don't think you're a god, but the magic in the bath bomb could have come from him, or maybe another horned god, like Ba–"

Claire quickly grabbed Mary's shoulder, causing her to jerk up sharply and snap her head towards her. Before she could get a word out Claire caught her gaze and silently indicated towards Jim. Frowning, Mary glanced over at him, freezing the instant her eyes landed on him.

She slunk back and slid her phone into her pocket, face bright red.

Mary, almost, always meant well, but she could get carried away.

No one dared to say anything, not wanting to push Jim further into his breakdown. The table dead silent apart from Jim's ragged breathing. Darci's fingernails digging into the aged wood of the bench underneath her so hard she thought they might break.

They couldn't keep doing this, pushing and pushing Jim far past the point where he was comfortable.

If they wanted to move forward they had to learn to be better.

After a few minutes Jim gradually steadied, breathing becoming more controlled and tremors receding. Still, as he slowly pulled himself back from the brink, none of them dared to say anything that might push him back there.

Then he spoke.

“I don’t know what I am,” his voice was hollow “There are just so many things I could be, every time I look into it I find something different and I never get any closer to the truth. I don’t *know* what I am and I don’t think I want to,”

He pushed himself up straight, revealing a deeply pained look on his face ”Mom’s been looking into Sarah Good for over a decade, if there was anything to find there she would have found it–” his voice cracked “Guys we *looked* for answers for over ten years, but they just aren’t there,”

Oh no, Jim wasn’t getting calmer, he was just forcing it all inside. Someone needed to do something now.

Darci scooted closer, twisted slightly to the side, and grasped Jim’s hand with her own.

She knew Jim well enough that he wouldn’t get upset at being touched by surprise, especially by someone he knew, and she wasn’t brave enough to give him a hug, but hopefully this would be enough.

Jim started a little at the contact, but otherwise didn’t move. Emboldening her to speak up.

“Ok you clearly know a lot more about this than we do, and if you want help with research I’m sure we’d all be happy to lend a hand,” Darci kept her focus on Jim, but she could see the others watching out of the corner of her eye “So unless you say so, we’ll just assume that you have this under control, and not look into anything related to your…condition, that sound ok?”

She'd been hoping that Jim would be able to tell them more about what magical things could be out there. But it looked like that wasn't going to happen, both because he didn't have the answers and he couldn't handle the questions. It sucked that she wasn't going to get answers today, but she needed to be a big girl and deal with it.

Darci would just have to figure out the answers to her questions herself.

Jim let out a deep breath, shoulders lowering, Darci could feel his hand go limp in her grip.

"Yeah…." he mumbled "That sounds good,"

The others all nodded along.

"We can do that,"

"Definitely,"

"Hundred percent,"

Things quieted down again, and for a moment Darci thought that they'd slip into eating their lunches in semi-comfortable silence, then Toby stood and moved around the table to sit at Jim's side.

"So…it's totally cool if you need more time and you're not ready to jump back in yet but…" he glanced down, fiddling with his thumbs "Do you want to…start…hanging out again?"

“…what?”

“Well…” Toby scooted half an inch closer towards him “Now that we all know about your…condition, and we got all the secrets out in the open, there’s nothing stopping us from spending time together again,”

Jim just blinked at him “Oh,”

“But like, only if you want to!” Toby rushed out, holding both hands out in front of him “If you’re not ready to go back to playing video games and hanging out at the strip mall we completely understand,”

“Yeah,” Darci released Jim’s hand and leaned onto her elbow at the same time “We might know everything now, but if you still need some space from us after…after everything we did that’s totally fine. When,”

If

“You want to start spending time with us again, just let us know, otherwise we’ll leave you alone,”

The whole reason Jim froze them all out in the first place was because they wouldn’t stop pushing. And they were still learning how to be better about that. Besides the pushing, after all the lying and double dealing crap they’d pulled Jim might need time, and a lot of it.

It had been two years before her dad and aunt Azalea started talking again, five years for him and her grandparents. Darci wouldn’t be

surprised if it was a long long time before–

“I’m ok to hang out again,”

Darci nearly fell over in her seat, elbow slipping before she caught herself.

What?

“Are…are you sure?” Claire scooted slightly closer “If you need a break from us that’s totally fine, you’ve been through a lot and things aren’t going to go back to normal overnight,”

“I…don’t want to take a break, from us. You guys all apologized and I know you really meant it, and….” his eyes turned down, voice dropping low “And I don’t want to be alone any more,”

Darci flinched at that, but did her best not to show it.

She’d been prepared to back off, if someone had done half the things that they’d done to Jim to her it would be a long time, if ever, before she was ready to let them back into her life. If it were her it might take months, maybe years, for the anger and bitterness to fade.

But Jim didn’t sound angry, or even bitter. He sounded lonely.

Her throat tightened.

Giving him space would have been easy, and they wouldn't have deal with their guilt face to face that way, but that's not what he wanted. Jim wanted to have them around and go back to being friends, even though it was the last thing they deserved.

But they'd spent months ignoring what Jim wanted, what he'd asked them, begged them to do. And things were so much worse because of it. if what he wanted was friends they owed it to him not to go wallow in guilt, but to try to be better.

"Ok then," Mary laid both hands on the table and pushed herself up straight "How about we plan on having lunch together from now on, like we used to, but if you ever want to skip a day that's totally fine, just shoot us a text to let us know,"

Jim slowly started to nod "That sounds…good,"

"And if you don't want to that's totally ok we don't have to," Toby babbled on "But since we all…know now, if you ever want to hang out after dark, that's an option, like if we're all hanging out at your place it doesn't have to end when the sun starts to go down, we can stay–"

He stopped abruptly "But only if that's ok with you, if you don't want us around while you're...you know, that's ok, we can totally limit our hang outs to daylight hours if that's what you want,"

Jim didn't speak up right away, biting his lip and drumming his fingers against the dry, splintering wood of the table "I…think I'd be ok with that, but it'd have to be something we plan on, not just happens by accident,"

Totally understandable.

Darci smiled at him and nodded vigorously “We can definitely do that,”

Mary was nodding right along with her “I’ll keep that in mind when making plans,” she pulled her phone back out “So this weekend we were planning on spending all Saturday at opening day of the farmers market…if you want to join us,”

“I…I’d like that,”

Mary peeked up at him from over her phone, then nodded “Sounds great, that night I was thinking we could–”

She froze, eyes going large.

“So Jim you’ve…never had a sleepover before?”

“Uh…no?”

“Well…when you’re ready, and if you want to…now you can,”

If she’d just told Jim that the sun rose in the west his expression would have been the exact same.

Claire scooted forward even more “Is that…something you want?”

“I…umm…”

Toby looked up at him with a gentle smile “I don’t have anything going on this Friday. If you’re ok with it we can start slow and do a sleepover with just the two of us, your place or mine, whatever works best for you, if that’s something you want to do,”

“I…guess you can come over Friday night and stay over,”

“Great!” Mary beamed “Then on Saturday morning you can text us if you want to meet up at the farmers market,”

Toby grinned, first at her then at Jim “Sounds like a plan,”

Jim turned back at him, and managed to give a weak, but sincere, smile back.

Darci slowly sat back and relaxed in her seat as the conversation flowed into easy discussion of future plans and outings for the next few weeks.

The world was still so much bigger and scarier than it was three days ago, but their own little piece of it was starting to get a little better.

Which was why she just couldn’t bring herself to ask Jim what he wanted to do about his dad.

Chapter End Notes

The other kids are very aware of how they screwed up refusing to respect boundaries, and they are trying so so hard to be better

and make up for it. But they aren't going to be perfect; ie, Mary not being aware of how her hypothesizing was upsetting Jim. And they have a lot on their plates to, the stress of rebuilding their fractured relationship and trying to cope with the world becoming so much bigger. They recognize that Jim is in an objectivly worse position than them, they can more or less walk away and not be involved with magical stuff while Jim cannot, but that doesn't negate their own struggles.

And of course, James Sr is still around ready to cause problems.

Next time: Jim has his first sleepover, and experiences all the emotional upheaval that comes with it.

Toby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toby hummed a cheerful tune while he skipped across the cul de sac towards Jim's house, duffle bag slung over his shoulder and grocery bags in hand. He was going to spend the night at his best buddy's house, he'd been wanting to do this for years and now it was finally happening.

They'd been planning this all week. After school he and Jim had stuck to the plan and briefly parted ways so Toby could stop by his house and trade out his backpack for his overnight bag. Plus grab games, movies, and as much junk food as he could physically carry.

It was their first sleepover after all, Toby wanted to make sure he got everything right. Especially after the week they had.

Of course the past week hadn't been…bad. They'd all been having lunch together and hanging out after school every day, just like old times.

Well, not quite.

Jim joined them for sure, he spent almost every free second with the group and never turned down a single invitation to spend time together. They'd made it clear that Jim could skip with no hard feelings any time but he never did. But despite his eagerness to hang out with them, Jim was quiet and withdrawn the whole time. They were lucky if he said more than two words while he was with them, usually only a yes or no when he was asked a question.

Toby and the girls did their absolute best to never push Jim into something he was uncomfortable with, double and triple checking to make sure he was ok with their plans, but Jim still stayed uncannily quiet.

So yeah they'd been hanging out together again, but things were still a *little* off.

Desperate, Toby had gone to Nana with his concerns, and she'd said something that had really stuck with him.

It's good that you're all putting in the effort to do better, but some things just take time. And Jim might need a lot of time to sort out his emotions and readjust.

And that checked out on every level. They'd all just gone through a really *really* rough few weeks, Jim especially. Everything wasn't going to go back to normal for them overnight. It was going to take time. Time and a whole *lot* of effort.

Which is why Toby needed to make sure their sleepover, their first real one together, he didn't count last Saturday for many *many* reasons, went perfectly.

Toby headed up the steps of Jim's house, reached for the doorknob and then hesitated. Should he knock? Just to let Jim know he was coming in, the sun was still up but he didn't want to catch Jim off guard if he was doing something...private. But then again he and Jim had never knocked on each other's doors before, would knocking now count as acting differently because of Jim's....change and make things weird?

After a few more seconds of hesitation Toby just reached out and

started turning the knob, loudly calling out as he came in “Hey Jimbo! You ready to get our slumber party on!”

Jim peeked at him from the kitchen “You bet Tobes, just have to finish setting the oven,”

“No worries,” Toby stepped in and set his bags down on the coffee table “I brought plenty of snacks to so we should be set. Want to start off with a Go Go Sushi tournament?”

“Sounds good to me,”

Toby got to work setting up the console and getting the game ready, Jim stepping into the room just as the screen flashed with the game. He turned and grinned up at him “Ready for me to kick your butt at sushi slinging?”

Jim smirked back “Oh someone’s going to get their butt kicked, but it’s not going to be me,”

In no time at all they were lost in the game, trading jibes and elbowing each other in their comfortable familiar way, Toby could almost believe it was a regular afternoon hangout.

Almost.

They were both laughing and joking around like they used to, but it felt strangely forced. Like they were just going through the motions of acting casual rather than actually being casual.

And Toby couldn't help but notice the time ticking by, the light outside slowly fading from lemon to amber as the sun sank lower. He'd come over around four, when it was still plenty light out, but that was changing fast. And it was only a matter of time before it went down for real.

The ding of the oven jerked Toby out of his woolgathering.

Jim paused the game and jumped to his feet "Oven's ready, I'll go put the pizza in,"

Toby waited patiently while Jim ran into the kitchen to throw the pizza in, less than a minute later he was back and they resumed their gaming session.

With sunset less than an hour away.

Don't act like anything is off, this is just a normal gaming session during a normal sleepover.

"Heads up Jim, you just missed a golden tuna roll,"

Jim let out a short laugh "Oh, whoops,"

Don't make it weird.

Suddenly the timer went off for the oven "I'll get it!" Jim ran back into the kitchen "Pizza's all ready, want to go ahead and eat?"

“I’m good for right now, besides we should probably let it cool for a bit so it doesn’t burn our mouths,”

“Ok then,”

Jim came back in and picked his console back up.

As their game went on Toby was very deliberately not looking at the clock or out the windows, but he didn’t need to look to see how fast the light was fading.

He was startled out of his thoughts when Jim suddenly paused the game “I’m gonna…run upstairs for a second,”

He didn’t say why, but Toby knew.

“Ok then, take your time,”

While Jim headed up to his room Toby got out his phone and started checking his email and texts. Not that he really needed to, but he didn’t want Jim to feel like he was leaving him hanging.

For five minutes there was nothing but complete silence coming from above.

Then footsteps started coming down the stairs, much heavier than the ones that had gone up them minutes before.

Toby kept his eyes glued to his phone even as the footsteps hit the wood floor behind him.

Don't stare, don't act weird. He might look a little different but this is still the same old Jimbo.

Only when he heard Jim taking his seat on the floor beside him did Toby look up from his phone.

Jim looked the exact same as he did a week ago. Tall, blue skin, horns and fangs. He'd traded out his favorite jacket and jeans for a baggy t-shirt and sweatpants.

*Do **not** make it weird.*

"Ready to find out who the sushi slinging champ is once and for all?"

Jim smiled awkwardly at him, or maybe that's just how his teeth worked now "Yep…let's do this,"

They picked their consoles back up, and Toby was relieved that the rest of the gaming session went normally. Sure there was some obvious tension in the room, but nothing that was unbearable.

Time and effort.

Half an hour later, after they'd both beaten their high scores, Toby set

his controller aside.

“I’m all sushi-ed out for now, how about a bite to eat?”

“Oh, uh….”

Toby walked over to rifle through his snack bag “I brought chips and seven layer dip, plus we can get into that pizza you were…just….”

Jim’s face had gone completely blank, eyes wide and sitting ramrod straight with his fingers curled into rigged claws around the controller.

Toby’s stomach dropped.

Oh no.

This was bad. Jim was getting uncomfortable and Toby needed to fix it *now* . What had he done wrong? Why was Jim so on edge? He’d just offered to–

Toby froze, slowly turning from Jim towards the bag of chips in his hands.

“Can you eat….chips while you’re like this?”

“Not….really,”

“What about the pizza you made?”

“Not that either,” out of nowhere Jim suddenly perked up and smiled at him “But it’s ok, I’m not hungry,”

Toby froze for a moment before slowly placing the chips back in the grocery bag, not taking his eyes off of Jim.

Something wasn’t adding up. If he wasn’t hungry why did Jim make a pizza that he couldn’t eat? Come to think of it, when he’d taken the pizza out of the oven Jim had asked him if he’d wanted to eat right then. At the time Toby didn’t think much of it, but….

“Were you trying to get the pizza finished early so you could have some before you changed?”

There was a flash in Jim’s eyes that told Toby he’d hit the nail on the head.

“No– I mean, if it worked out I would have had some, but it’s fine, I’m not hungry, and I can have pizza for breakfast tomorrow,”

“I can wait while you grab some of your meat out of the garage if you want,”

“I’ll– I’ll be fine,”

“Hey I don’t mind you going full paleo while I’m here,” Toby forced a smile and tried to inject as much casualness into his words as he could “Gotta get your protein in,”

Jim flinched so faintly he nearly missed it “Look I– I’m not hungry,”

Toby felt his face start to heat up. He knew, he *knew* with absolute certainty that Jim was lying to him right now.

“How can you not be hungry? Neither of us had anything to eat since lunch,”

“While– while you ran across the street I had a snack,”

“So in the two minutes we were apart you managed to eat enough to last you the whole night?”

Jim’s lip curled in the beginnings of a snarl “Toby I said I’m *fine* ,”

Toby paused at seeing Jim starting to get frustrated. He didn’t want to keep insisting to Jim that he knew he was hungry while Jim was insisting he wasn’t, even if he knew he was, but still–

“If you were hungry would you be ok with eating….something that you can eat while I’m here?”

Jim opened his mouth and then hesitated.

That told Toby everything he needed to know, stomach twisting itself into knots.

This was messed up, Jim shouldn't be going hungry in his own house, not because of him. But if Jim was too uncomfortable to eat in front of Toby why had he even agreed to…

Toby thought back to when he'd first asked Jim about doing a sleepover. He'd brought up the idea, and tried to make it clear that they didn't have to do it if Jim was uncomfortable. And Jim had said yes and that he was fine with Toby staying over, but…

Every day during the past week Jim had said yes to everything the four of them had asked him to do. He'd even agreed to go to a poetry jam, even though Toby knew he hated that.

Did Jim even really want to do this? Did he actually want to have Toby over? Was he *really* comfortable with this?

Or maybe Jim was so desperate to avoid rocking the boat that he just agreed to whatever they said, regardless of what he actually wanted.

By now Toby knew the heat under his skin was showing on his cheeks.

What was he thinking? Of course Jim wasn't ready to have him stay over just one week after he'd shared his deepest darkest secret with them. Of course Jim wasn't comfortable having Toby around while he was in his night form so soon.

But Toby had pushed him and he'd said yes anyways.

His throat tightened “I’ll…I’ll just go,”

The change in Jim’s expression was instantaneously “What? No!” he shot to his feet “I don’t want you to go!”

Picking up his duffle bag, Toby started moving towards the door “It’s ok, it’s clearly too soon for this, I’ll head back to my place and we can spend the night talking on the walkie–”

“For the last time, I’m *not* hungry!”

Toby’s fraying nerve snapped “Yes you are Jim! I’m not an idiot, me being here is obviously too much for you, and I should never have pushed you into this. I pushed you so much over the last few months and never let you have the space you needed, I don’t want to keep–”

“Would you *stop* !” Jim shouted, a low rumble underneath his words “Not everything I do or don’t do is because of you guys, if I want to say no I’ll say no!”

“Then why haven’t you said no once this week? For crying out loud Jim you agreed to go to a poetry jam! Didn’t you once say that you’d rather eat live earthworms than go to one of those!?”

“ *Look.* I’m a big boy and I can take care of myself just fine.” Jim snarled “If I don’t want to do something then I *won’t* . I don’t need you guys asking me ten different times if I’m ok with something and acting like I’m going to fall apart if one of you breathes on me wrong!”

“You call going over sixteen hours without eating taking care of yourself!?”

“Tobes I– I– I’m *handling* this, just drop it,”

“No Jim,” Toby planted both feet firmly on the ground, staring Jim dead in the eye “I’m not dropping it, not when you’re starving yourself because I’m here!”

Toby felt no small amount of guilt at the deeply wounded look on Jim’s face. That was a low blow, and they both knew it. But Jim had been there nearly every time Dr. Lake lectured him about the importance of nutrition and how it was dangerous for teenagers to diet, so Toby knew that this was one point that would hit home.

“Ok…look,” Toby stepped closer “It’s alright if this is too soon, we can try again later when you’re ready, I don’t want to keep repeating the same problems from the last few months,”

A single blue eye twitched “Toby, our *problems* happened because I *always* told you exactly what I did and didn’t want you to do, sometimes I even shouted it,” his voice was a hair away from a growl “And you guys just *chose* to ignore me over and over again. Me not making my boundaries clear was *never* the issue. Believe me, if I have a problem with something you guys are doing, I will let. You. *Know* .”

Toby shriveled under the force behind Jim’s voice and had to stop himself from scrambling back.

It’s just Jim, it’s the same old Jimbo, he’s just really mad right now, he’s not going to attack you.

“You’re– you’re right,” he took in a deep breath “You always made your lines explicitly clear and we chose to cross them and that’s on us, but there were times that we all *knew* something was wrong, like with the basement and the scars, but you still tried to lie about it, so I can’t believe you when you say you’re handling this,”

Jim’s steely expression slipped just a fraction.

Emboldened, Toby continued “We promised no more lies, so Jim, answer me yes or no, are you hungry right now?”

They stared each other down for nearly a full minute, but ultimately Jim was the one to look away first.

Burning surged in Toby’s throat, making him have to fight to keep his voice steady “I want hang out with you at night, but me being here is obviously making things hard for you and I think…I think it’s just too soon,”

Even as much as it pained him to do so Toby turned away from Jim’s heartbroken expression and headed towards the door.

As much as it hurt, sleepovers were clearly too much for Jim right now. Maybe after they’d all had more time to heal they could–

Faster than his eyes could track Jim was suddenly in front of him, crouched down to Toby’s eye level “Tobes I– I– ok look, it is weird having you over. I’m not used to being around other people when I’m like this. But having you here and having it be uncomfortable is still better than being alone,”

His gut gave another painful twist, legs feeling like lead “You shouldn’t have to choose between being alone and being uncomfortable,”

“Toby *please* ,” Jim's voice took on a desperate, pleading whine “I– I– growing up I spent so many nights, for years, stuck by myself in the house. Mom was at work and I didn’t have anyone else, I– I was so lonely I could barely stand it, and the only thing that made it a little less miserable was knowing that when morning came I could see you again. I can’t– I can’t go back to that, so please *please* just stay,”

Toby's heart clenched painfully, combining with the pinching feeling in his belly into something unbearable. He was trying to do what was best for Jim here, but god dammit he wasn’t made of stone.

He stepped up close to him “Tell me how I can help, tell me how I can make it so you can eat while I’m here,”

Jim opened his mouth, then shut it again, no sound coming out.

The burning in Toby’s throat surged up behind his eyes “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it,”

“I– I–”

“Please just tell me what you need me to do!” Toby couldn’t stop his voice from cracking “How do I fix this?”

“ *I don’t know!* ”

That was close enough to a roar that it had Toby staggering back.

" *I don't know how to fix this ok!* I want to just relax and have fun the way we used to. I want to eat normal and not have to worry about everything all the time but I don't know how!" Jim stumbled past him towards the couch, plopping down hunched over with his head in his hands.

Toby opened his mouth and then hesitated.

This…this sounded like a lot more than just the food issue.

"What do you mean?"

Jim reached up and tangled his fingers in his hair "I hate being so stressed out all the time but I can't turn it off, I just– I just feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff and the slightest thing will send me over the edge. I just…" his voice was small "I just want everything to go back to normal,"

The room went dead silent, the only sound in Jim's panting breaths.

Waiting a few more beats, Toby stepped over and took a seat next to Jim on the couch.

"Jim…I don't think things should go back to normal,"

"...what?"

“I mean…the way things were with us before, with you keeping this whole big secret to yourself and us not really understanding what was going on with you, that wasn’t healthy, for any of us,” Toby risked scooting closer to him “And what you just said, about being alone every night for years, was that true?”

He flinched and looked away.

“You shouldn’t have to go back to that, not ever again. I think…” Toby said slowly “I think we need to figure out a new normal,”

Jim’s head dropped, horns pointing straight up in the air, and when he spoke up his voice was barely auidible “But…how?”

Toby didn’t have an answer for that, biting his lip and drumming his fingers against his knee “Hey Jimbo,”

“Yeah?”

He hopped off the couch and stepped in front of him “Can you lean forward a bit, you’re pretty tall,”

“O…kay,” Jim looked confused, but nevertheless complied and bent down until he and Toby were closer to eye to eye.

Toby took two steps forward and hugged him.

“I don’t know how to fix this either, but I’m going to stick with you and we’ll figure it out together, all of us.”

He squeezed Jim as hard as he could despite his marble like skin “I’m so sorry that you were scared and alone for so long, but you’re not alone anymore. I don’t care if you have horns or need to eat raw meat, you’ll always be my best buddy no matter what. Even if you shed your skin and sprout eyeballs all over your body, I’ll be there with a king sized bottle of eyedrops. And I promise, no matter how weird things are or how messed up it gets, I’m going to stay right by your side.”

For a moment Jim didn’t move, stiff as a statue under Toby’s grip, then he started to shudder, stony body shaking as his arms crept up and wrapped Toby in a steely bear hug. Toby kept on hugging him right back as Jim buried his face in Toby’s shoulder, obscuring his own blurry vision with black hair and a single ivory horn, even when the force of Jim’s grip lifted him off the floor.

Toby felt the first sob more than he heard it, muffled into his sweater vest, but the next ones were louder. He didn't say anything, just squeezed Jim back as best he could with his feet off the ground while he sobbed into his shoulder.

They stayed like that for a long time, until Jim eventually set him back down on the floor and pulled away, not too discreetly wiping his face with his sleeve.

Toby felt his own eyes brimming but powered through it “Look Jim, I– I know there’s a lot of stuff from the last few months I have to make up for, but I– I don’t ever want you to be scared of me again, I–”

“Tobes,” Jim blinked, voice surprisingly clear “I was never scared of you,”

“But– I thought– the whole reason you didn’t tell me about– this…” he gestured to Jim up and down “Was because you were scared of what I would do if I…”

“Tobes I…I…was never scared of you, I was scared of *losing* you” Jim stepped back and sank down onto the couch “I was scared that if you ever saw me like this you’d freak out and…”

He trailed off, tacky silence following his words.

“I meant what I said,” Jim’s voice was soft “You were the best friend I could have ever asked for, seeing you during the day and spending nights on the walkies together got me through some of the worst years of my life. If I ever lost you…I don’t know what I would do,”

Toby was nearly knocked off his feet as a crushing wave of emotion surged through him, choking up his throat and burning behind his eyes. It didn’t feel great, but it didn’t feel awful either. The best way Toby could describe it would be his heart growing three sizes.

“And about the poetry jam…like, yeah I think they’re boring and I’d never go to one by myself, but being there with you guys, it was fun because you were having fun. If I thought I was going to be completely miserable the entire time I would have said no,”

Toby finally managed to find his voice “Ok but…you have been pretty quiet this week,”

Jim cringed “I have been…haven’t I, it’s just that…I’ve never really had people… *know* before,”

“Yeah I can see how that would make you uncomfortable,”

“No it’s not that, I mean does feel weird knowing that other people know but–” Jim let out a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair “Honestly it’s a relief,”

“A…relief?”

“Yeah I mean for years I was so scared about people finding out the truth about me, it was hanging over my head for years, but now this huge massive weight is just…gone,”

“Oh-kay…” Toby took a seat on the couch next to Jim “I know you just said it was a relief that we know, and you don’t like us asking your permission over and over, but…didn’t you also say that you felt like you were constantly standing on the edge of a cliff?”

Jim cringled “I…did say that…didn’t I…” he leaned forward and pinched the bridge of his nose. Toby just sat there patiently.

“Look that…that has nothing to do with you guys or anything you do or don’t do, it’s more like…” his voice dropped off.

Toby waited.

“That…feeling started when CPS started investigating mom, I was so worried that if I slipped up and said or did the wrong thing mom would get arrested. I know you guys would help and protect mom if anything like that happened now, but I…I just can’t stop worrying,”

Toby looked down and away, dragging the toe of his shoe against the carpet.

Jim might need a lot of time to sort out his emotions and readjust.

“Look Jim I’m not an expert, but I think…I think you might just need time. I mean, you spent four months slash ten years stressing and worrying about this; versus, like, a week of us knowing. It take some time before you to get used to things being different,”

Jim suddenly sat bolt upright and around to look Toby straight in the eye “That’s why I want you here Tobes. To get used to this. Having you here at night while I’m…this, it’s weird, I’m not used to it, but I *want* to get used to it. I want *this* ,” he gestured back and forth between himself and Toby “To be our new normal,”

Toby twisted in his own seat until they were fully facing each other “Then I’ll stay here and help you make that new normal. And, and I’ll let the girls know to, I’ll still ask if you’re ok with doing something before we do it, but only once or twice,”

“Thank you,”

“ *Maybe* three times,”

“Jerk,” but Jim was smiling while he said it.

“And if you want me to stay the night tonight then I’m game, but…” Toby hesitated, he didn’t want to keep poking this issue, but he

couldn't just let it lie either "But you can't just not eat, if you need me to step out on the porch, or go wait across the street while you eat something I'll do it, I–"

"No– no you're–" Jim pulled in a deep breath and slowly let it out "You're right, and you don't need to leave. I'll just– I'll…just…"

"How about I get Danger House started?" Toby jumped off the couch and grabbed the DVD case "And while the trailers are rolling you can go take care of…anything you might need to take care of,"

Jim's eyes softened, Toby reading the gratitude in them as clearly as if Jim had shouted it "Thanks…I'll….I'll be right back,"

Toby nodded at him before turning back towards the TV. Focusing on loading the DVD and not on watching Jim walk out of the room.

Once the DVD was in he headed back towards the couch, the sound of the first trailers coming from the speakers. But underneath the sounds of the TV there were other noises, echoing down the hall from the garage.

The soft thump of a fridge door opening and closing followed by the crinkle of plastic, for a brief moment everything was quiet, then Toby heard a wet crunching sound. Something he had only ever heard before when one of Nana's cats caught and ate a mouse.

Toby let out a heavy sigh, slumping back and practically melting into the couch. Jim was eating something. He wasn't starving himself because of Toby's presence.

Even though his own stomach was still churning fiercely, Toby opened the bag of chips and forced himself to pop one into his mouth. The salty flavor slowly settled his stomach, and after the first trailer finished he was able to pull out the seven layer dip and start scooping it up with the chips. A trailer and a half later the crunching sounds from the garage stopped and he heard footsteps heading back up the hall. Regardless of what he heard, Toby made sure to never let his focus leave the TV screen, but instead of coming straight back to the living room the footsteps headed into the kitchen, followed by the sound of water spraying from the sink turning on.

But Toby wasn't paying attention to that, no sir-ee, he was eating his chips and dip and watching movie trailers and doing just fine waiting while Jim finished– whatever he needed to do. Keeping his eyes glued on the TV screen with laser-like intensity.

Toby didn't look up once the entire time Jim was washing up in the sink. But when the water shut off he didn't hear the sound of footsteps starting again. Just silence underneath the chatter from the TV.

As the silence stretched on longer and longer Toby tried to force himself to stay still but he just couldn't take it any more. He raised his head, turning slightly to the side and risking a peek over into the kitchen.

Jim was standing in front of the sink, staring down at a wrinkled scrap of yellow paper in his hand, eyebrows crumpled together and lips pressed into a firm line.

Quickly looking away, Toby locked his eyes back on the TV and didn't let his gaze leave it until he heard the sound of footsteps heading towards the living room.

"Alright," Jim plunked down on the couch next to him "Danger House

here we come,”

Toby grinned at him before scooting closer and throwing an arm around Jim’s waist “Remember this movie series gets really scary, so if you get too freaked we can turn all the lights on before we fall asleep,”

Jim gave a watery laugh as he wrapped his own arm around Toby’s shoulders “Weren’t you the one who wanted to sleep with all the lights on after last time we watched this?”

“Well you’re clearly misremembering things, but tell you what, we’ll compromise. If either one of us gets scared we’ll both spend the rest of the night setting up booby traps around the house,”

Jim chuckled “Deal,”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone wondering the piece of paper Jim was looking at is the sticky note Strickler gave him in chapter 16.

It can be incredibly frustrating to have people fuss over you and treat you like you're made of glass. But at the same time; if you're doing a crap job of communicating/taking care of yourself you really can't blame people for treading lightly around you.

In Jim's case his insecurity of his troll form was so bad, not only was he refusing to meet his own needs, he failed to communicate them at every stage. Early on he could have told Toby he was hungry and eaten some human food before sundown, but he was so desperate to avoid admitting that he was uncomfortable eating meat around Toby, that he doubled down and pretended he wasn't hungry at all. And Jim's plan was 100% to go the whole night without eating, he was so worried about Toby "catching" him he wouldn't have even tried to eat something once Toby fell asleep. But because Toby knows Jim so well, and he isn't an idiot, he saw through Jim instantly.

Thus kicking off a painful, but much needed conversation between Jim and Toby about where their friendship stands, and a realization on Jim's part that he might need professional help untangling some of his issues.

Barbara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara tried to force her eyes to focus on the words on the page in front of her. She'd started this book half an hour ago but had yet to make it past the first page. Despite her best efforts to get immersed in what the New York Times referred to as 'A heartbreakingly beautiful coming of age story' her attention was constantly drawn back to the small black object burning a hole in her pocket.

She wasn't going to call him, she was *not* going to call him.

Her phone hadn't made a single peep the entire evening, but that was a good thing, no news was good news. The fact that Jim hadn't called her meant that everything was going well and Barbara shouldn't hover and nag and hound him just to soothe her own apprehension.

But god dammit she wanted to.

A ring broke through the silent house, nearly startling Barbara out of her seat, fumbling with her book and nearly dropping it. Getting a hold of herself, she snapped her gaze down towards the small lump in her front pocket. She hadn't felt the buzzer kick on, and the chime hadn't sounded quite right, so wha–

The ringing came again, but not from the phone, from the doorbell.

For a moment all she could do was sit there and stare at the front door in disbelief, book still dangling from her hand by its back cover. Granted it wasn't late, not really, but eight o clock was certainly past

average calling hours. So who could be ringing her doorbell?

Barbara hesitated for just a moment before getting to her feet and heading to the door. She was more than a little concerned about who might be there, but it wasn't like she could just ignore them. And as anxious as she still was about where Jim was right now, at least the biggest risk factor to having evening callers had been removed from the equation.

Coming right up to the door, Barbara peeked through the peephole, Nancy Domzalski's wrinkled face smiling at her through the distorted glass.

For a moment Barbara couldn't move.

Nancy? Granted out of all the people to drop in for an unexpected visit this was probably the best option, but what was she doing here? There wasn't an emergency, if there was Nancy would have called rather than walk over, and she knew where the kids were just as well as Barbara, so why….

Hesitating for only a few more seconds, Barbara let out a breath, unlatched the deadbolt, and stepped back to pull open the door.

No reason to get worked up, Nancy was harmless. And if nothing else this would be a better distraction than the book.

"Hello Nancy,"

"Hello Barbara!" the older woman beamed back at her, sunbeams practically radiating out of her "I just picked up a new floral tea at the

store today," she held up a small box "I was wondering if you would like to try it with me?"

"Oh, ummm….sure,"

Nancy's already sunny expression brightened even further as she stepped into the house and made a beeline for the kitchen. Barbara shut the door, let out a deep breath, and followed her.

Coming into the kitchen, she was startled to see that Nancy had already set up tea bags in two mugs and started the electric kettle, standing in front of it poised and ready to strike when the kettle went off. Another reminder that despite her age, Nancy could move with startling speed when she was on a mission. In any case maybe now Barbara could relax and forget about–

"I think this is a great experience for the kids,"

Barbara nearly tripped in the entryway.

Well there went her hopes for a distraction.

If Nancy noticed the sudden change in Barbara's mood she didn't comment on it "They're only going to be this young once, it's important that they make the most of it," she turned and looked towards her expectantly "Don't you think?"

Guilt squirmed to life alongside the anxiety already twisting in her belly.

Three nights ago, when all five kids were sitting in the living room not ten feet away, Toby had been the first one to bring up the idea. One so horrific she's nearly dropped the laptop she'd been carrying. In the moment she'd been too stunned to react properly, but to Barbara's growing horror the rest of the kids quickly latched on to it. And when they'd turned towards her for Jim to ask her permission to join them, she'd told them in no uncertain terms that the answer was no.

Absolutely not, it's too dangerous.

I don't care if all the other kids do it, it's still illegal.

You are not going and that's final.

But instead of accepting that answer they'd fired right back with counter arguments of their own.

No way anyone's going to see us.

If someone does get close Jim can just hide.

And if someone does see him on accident we can just say he's cosplaying.

Please please please can Jim come!

Barbara remembered so clearly just how furious she'd been at their stubborness, fists tight at her sides and quivering with indignation from head to toe. She'd opened her mouth, fully prepared to bring down the hammer and make it clear that Jim was *not* going–

Then she'd spotted the look on Jim's face; anxious and uncertain, but so *desperately* hopeful, and the words had withered in her throat.

Before she could recover he'd spoken up in a quiet voice.

I know it's going to be risky, but….but I want to do this, and I know these guys will have my back. So can I go…please?

Those few soft words from her son had thoroughly gutted her.

Jim had spent so much of his life in confinement, missed out on so many experiences that he would never get back, how could she take one more away from him?

And…maybe it wouldn't be as dangerous as she was building up in her head. When she took a step back and actually listened, their backup plans sounded like more than enough to handle any trouble they might run into. Literally nearly every other teenager in town was doing to same thing, it was probably perfectly safe–

But Jim wasn't a normal teenager, and he risked far more than any of his peers by going out.

It would be fine, Jim would be with the others, and they knew what to do if Jim was in danger of being seen, she'd gone over it with them no fewer than a dozen times, at least half of them just today. And with where they would be that was extremely unlikely to happen in the first place. Barbara was just probably just being paranoid….

A wave of nausea hit her as the guilt surged back in full force.

And given that she'd had almost the exact same knee jerk reaction to Jim's perfectly reasonable request from a week ago…

So she'd forced down her doubts, bit back her protests, and said yes. The delighted look on Jim's face stirring up something deeply painful inside her. A feeling that had stayed with her through the rest of the week and right up to this moment.

Fortunately she was saved from responding by the kettle clicking off.

"Oh! Water's ready, let me pour that for you," Barbara swept past Nancy and hastily picked up the kettle, reaching over to pour steaming water into the two mugs. But in her rush she ended up splashing more than a little on the counter.

Smooth Barbara, real smooth.

Cheeks burning and very aware of Nancy's eyes on her, Barbara scooped up her own mug and scurried over to sit on the couch.

Holding the mug up, she blew over the steaming liquid even as it fogged up her glasses, trying to get it to a drinkable temperature. When she was sipping tea she wouldn't be able to speak or answer any questions. Glasses still clouded and focus locked on the mug, she heard more than saw Nancy step into the room.

"To get the most flavor the tea needs to steep for seven minutes, then we can taste it straight before doctoring it with sugar and honey,"

Barbara felt her face growing even hotter “Of– of course,”

She set the mug down on the coffee table in front of her, forcing her hands to stay steady.

“Don’t forget the coaster Dearie,”

By now Barbara knew she had to be bright scarlet “R– right,”

She reached to the side, grabbed two coasters off the side table, and set them down in front of her. Lifting her mug to replace it on top of one while Nancy placed her mug next to it on the twin coaster before taking a seat beside Barbara.

For a few seconds neither of them said anything.

“I know it can be hard, and I’m not telling you not to worry,” Nancy spoke up quietly “Goodness knows even when Toby’s thirty I’ll still worry about him, but there comes a time when you just need to have trust in the child you raised,”

Maybe it was because she was already keyed up from Jim being gone, but something about that comment in particular caused something to come unglued inside Barbara and the words tumbled out before she could stop them “I do trust Jim, it’s everyone else out there that I don’t trust, there’s just so many people out there that can–”

She cut herself off before she said too much.

Heavy silence pressed down on the two of them like a suffocating blanket, Barbara netting her fingers together, knuckles white, and staring down at her lap, the atmosphere of the room practically choking her.

“There are a lot of bad people out there,” Nancy said at last “But more than just trusting him to make good choices, I trust that I taught Toby the right skills and knowledge to keep himself safe when I’m not there,”

Barbara bit her lip so hard she tasted blood.

That sentence in particular did *not* sit well in her gut, and this time she knew damn well why.

What had she spent the past decade teaching Jim? To hide himself away from the outside world, and not a thing about what to do if he found himself in it.

But how could she have taught him anything different, Jim’s transformations weren’t just a cute little quirk, it was a serious condition and other people seeing would put him in immediate, life threatening danger. Concealing it at all costs was the only option.

But his friends knew, and they weren’t a threat, maybe in small, controlled steps his secret could be safely shared…

But Toby and the girls were just children themselves, and there was just so much they didn’t understand. And Barbara couldn’t put her child’s safety in the hands of four other children, no matter how mature and understanding they were.

But she couldn't just keep Jim locked up in the house forever, not only was that unimaginably cruel, it simply wasn't realistic–

But with how serious his situation was she couldn't just let Jim run wild around the town with only the other kids as company, running the risk of god-only-knows-who seeing him, she was already having second, third, and fourth thoughts about his plans for tonight–

Barbara braced herself against the couch and forced her breathing to slow.

How she felt about Jim's plans tonight didn't matter any more. He was already neck deep in them, and hastily calling them off and having him come home right this instant was riskier than letting them finish and having Jim return at the agreed time.

No matter how hard it was she had no choice but to make peace with what had already been set in motion.

Forcing back the storm of conflicting emotions and contradictory thoughts, Barbara reached over and picked up her mug "So tell me about this tea,"

Nancy's cheerful expression flickered, giving a brief glimpse of something shadowy beneath the surface "Barbara, I–"

The chime of the doorbell echoed through the house.

Startled, Barbara glanced over at the front door, then down at Nancy,

who looked just as surprised as she felt.

It was now well past 8pm, and the closest person she had to a friend was sitting on the couch right next to her, so who on earth could be ringing her doorbell?

The doorbell rang again, the chime somehow sounding impatient. Shaking off her nerves, Barbara forced herself to head over towards it, peering through the peephole for the second time tonight.

Her stomach instantly plummeted to the floor, the last remnants of her flush of embarrassment swallowed up by an icy wave of dread.

Nancy might be more or less harmless, but this person was *not.* And as rude as it was Barbara could always turn Nancy away at the door. With this person that wasn't an option.

Schooling her features into a neutral expression, Barbara tamped down the urge to put on the chain, and turned the knob.

Her heartbeat boomed in her ears as she slowly pulled the door open, revealing Dorrie's smiling face.

"Hello Dr. Lake, I hope your night is going well,"

"Hello Dorrie," Barbara replied, satisfied that her voice sounded more or less neutral and betrayed none of her internal panic.

Dorrie stepped past her into the living room, both her and Nancy

jolting slightly when they caught sight of each other.

Barbara shut the door and moved back into the main room “I’m sorry I don’t think you’ve met, this is Nancy, my neighbor and Toby’s grandmother. Nancy, this is Dorrie…with child protective services,”

Dorrie recovered quickly, slapping on a chipper grin as she stepped towards the older woman “Well it’s very nice to meet you Nancy, I hate to be so rude, but Barbara and I–”

Nancy all but jumped to her feet “Think nothing of it dear, I’ll just show myself out,” she turned and gave Barbara a small wave as she headed out the door “Have a good night Barbara, let me know what you think of the tea,”

Barbara managed to give a stiff wave in response before Nancy disappear as she shut the door behind her, watching through the window as she stepped of their porch and started hustling back across the–

Wait was Nancy still holding her mug?

Dorrie moved from the front hall to the dining room, raking each room with her gaze as she did, inspecting for evidence of neglect or mistreatment no doubt. She must have satisfied her curiosity fairly quickly because after only a minute of glancing around she abruptly turned back towards Barbara “Can I talk to Jim?”

Barbara’s heartbeat stuttered and stopped entirely before picking up at a much faster pace.

As awkward as it had been having Nancy here, right now she really wished the woman hadn't left.

"Jim….isn't at home right now,"

Dorrie blinked "Oh? Where is he then?"

Her nails stung as they dug into her palms, desperately trying to keep herself from trembling.

The last thing she wanted to do was tell Dorrie exactly where her son was right now, even if every other teenager in town was doing the exact same thing. But any lies or contradictions she told this woman would inevitably be found out and things would end up even worse as a result of her dishonesty.

As much as it killed her Barbara had no other option but the truth.

"Jim is…he's…having a bonfire with his friends, in the city open space,"

Dorrie's eyebrows shot up into her perm "A bonfire?"

Barbara swallowed but did her best not to show it "Yes, apparently there's a big bonfire that a lot of the kids at his school are going to–"

Stop it you sound defensive

“But he’s having a smaller one with his friends. Just him, Toby, Darci, Mary, and Claire,”

However Dorrie felt about this news, her facial expression didn’t so much as twitch “Would it be alright if we called him?”

Well it looked like Barbara was getting the phone call she wanted, be careful what you wish for alright.

“Of course,”

They seated themselves at the table while Barbara pulled out her phone and dialed Jim, turning the phone on speaker and setting it on the table between them.

After four rings it picked up. But the voice that rang out from it wasn’t Jim’s, it was Toby’s.

“Hello?”

“Hi Toby, you’re on speaker,” Barbara leaned towards the phone, willing her tone to stay even “Dorrie is here and she’d like to talk to Jim, can you put him on?”

“Oh sure once he gets down from the tree,”

Dorrie blinked at the phone “Tree?”

“Yeah he wanted to see if he could see the main bonfire from he– Wait CPS Dorrie!? Actually we’re just climbing trees in Claire’s backyard, all very short safe trees, no fires or any other dangerous hazardous here, and we’re all wearing helmets to–”

“Oh my god Tobes give me the–”

The voices became garbled as rustling and scuffling sounds came from the other side of the line, Barbara and Dorrie staring down at the phone in stupefied silence.

“Hey mom hey Dorrie,” Jim’s voice cut in crystal clear “How’s it going?”

The moment she heard Jim’s voice Dorrie’s unflappable smile slid into place “Hello Jim, I’m doing well thank you, how is your night going?”

“It’s good I’m good, just hanging out and stuff,”

“Your mom told me you’re out with your friends in the city open space?”

“Ummmm….yeah?”

There was a subtle change in Dorrie’s expression, so faint Barbara nearly missed it. Her smile had lost some of its rubbery chipperness and softened into something…warmer?

“Well it’s really great to see you’re getting out of the house, and don’t

worry, you're not in trouble for having a bonfire,"

"It's just I've done a lot of fires before and its been raining a lot so we thought– wait, really?"

Barbara didn't let herself so much as twitch, refusing to drop her guard, keeping her ears trained on Jim's voice and eyes on Dorrie.

"Yes," she said with a chuckle "If we tried to process every kid that had a bonfire in the open space we'd never have time to do anything else. I'm just glad to see that you're out having fun with your friends,"

"Oh…ok,"

"I'd like to talk with you a little more in depth, but since you're busy tonight, how about I come back on Sunday morning and we can talk then?"

"Sure that…that works,"

Barbara could hear the tangible relief in Jim's voice but hoped Dorrie missed it.

"Thank you Jim, I won't keep you any longer, enjoy the rest of the night,"

"Oh, sure, thanks, uh….bye,"

“Goodbye,” Dorrie gestured for Barbara to end the call, she reached over and complied with two taps on the screen.

Barbara was very aware of Dorrie’s eyes on her as she grabbed the phone and slid it back into her pocket, palms sweaty. What was going through that woman’s head right now? Did she mean what she said about letting the bonfire slide? And what did she think about Barbara letting her son run around the woods at ni–

“Does Jim spend a lot of nights out with his friends?”

Barbara struggled to recompose herself “Not– not every night, but most nights that aren’t school nights, although he doesn’t usually stay out late, he’s usually back home by ten–”

Stop acting defensive that’s going to make her more suspicious.

Dorrie nodded along at her explanation “Now the last time we spoke, it seemed like Jim didn’t do much outside the house besides school. What brought on this change?”

Barbara’s stomach pinched dangerously, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of her neck. There it was, the very question she’d been dreading.

Two weeks ago Jim was practically a recluse, now he and his friends were out romping in the woods with no adult supervision. Such a radical change was something a CPS investigator was bound to notice.

And want a reasonable explanation for.

“Oh, well…”

Fingers digging into her knee, Barbara rifled through her brain to try to figure out what she could say. Outright lying wasn’t an option, but neither was giving the whole story. But she needed to give Dorrie some kind of explanation, what other options did she–

The answer came to her in a flash.

Not lies or the whole truth, but something in between.

Half truths.

Throw in just enough truth to satisfy Dorrie, with just a touch of embellishment to smooth over the rough edges.

“Jim had a long talk with his friends, and they decided they wanted to change things and do more outside the house together, they all ran this by me and I said that that was fine, although Jim still always asks permission for anything that will keep him out past dark, and always let’s me know where he’ll be,”

Dorrie jotted something down in her notebook before looking back up at Barbara “And how do you feel about Jim spending more time away from home?”

Barbara’s breath caught in her throat, forcing herself not to react.

Time to walk the razor's edge.

"The adjustment was…hard for me, and I still worry quite a bit whenever he's out, but…"

She let out a shaky breath "Jim's…not a little boy any more, he's fifteen years old, he needs to go out and have his own life with his own friends, and he doesn't need me there holding his hand every step of the way. He needs to do this on his own,"

By the time she finished Barbara's heart was pounding from how much of herself she'd revealed.

Dorrie quickly jotted something down in her notebook before looking back up " I've also heard that Jim has started seeing a therapist, is this true?"

Barbara's mouth went dry, jaw dropping open. She didn't know why she was so shocked that Dorrie was already aware of *that* very recent development, this woman had proven before she had a knack for being informed.

"Yes, yes he is,"

"And what brought about that change?"

Hre breath hitched.

I'm not going to tell them everything mom, I'll leave out the transforming and stuff, but I think this could really help me.

"Jim…asked for it," Barbara said haltingly "He said that he felt it could be helpful for him,"

There, that was all completely true, and if Dorrie asked for more specifics Barbara could cite confidentiality and refuse, and she'd be sure to talk to Jim before he spoke with Dorrie to make sure he didn't let anything sli–

"I believe that should cover all my questions for tonight," Dorrie shut her notebook, propped her elbows on the table, and netted her fingers together "But since Jim isn't here do you mind if we talk about something a bit more serious?"

It took everything Barbara had to keep from jerking in her seat.

Something serious. That could mean a lot of things, ranging from not great to very *very* bad. And she did not want to discuss anything on that spectrum with the woman in front of her. But just like all their dealings with CPS, Dorrie wasn't asking if Barbara wanted to discuss this, she was asking if Barbara wanted to do this the easy way or the hard way.

Keep it together, don't lose your cool, you can do this, the only way out is through.

Forcing herself to sit up straight and meet the other woman's eyes, Barbara opened her mouth and squeezed her voice into something calm and even "What did you have in mind?"

“I understand your ex-husband is back in town,”

Inside her composed shell Barbara shattered, lead weight dropping in her abdomen and organs curdling in on themselves, laying both arms against the table to brace herself “Yes,” she forced the words out past the lump that had just sprouted in her throat “He is,”

“I assume that you are also aware of the incident where he went on school grounds in order to try and see Jim and was trespassed by the school?”

Barbara’s throat constricted even further, strangling any attempts at speech, all she could manage to do was give a stiff nod in response.

Dorrie’s expression softened into something sympathetic and just shy of pitying “That must be very concerning for you,”

Barbara nodded again, not trusting herself to speak.

“Have you been in direct contact with him?”

“No, I haven’t answered any of his calls and I do not plan on seeing or contacting him in any way, Jim told me that he doesn’t want to see him either. I just– I–” Barbara gripped the edge of the table, fighting to keep her breathing steady “James has been sniffing around for over a month now, and honestly I’m– I’m worried. James was never violent towards me or Jim during our relationship, but towards the end I saw some sides of him I didn’t expect, and now that it’s ten years later….”

Her glasses started to mist up but this time there wasn’t a mug of tea to blame.

Back when James first left ten years ago, she honestly hadn't had time to really process it. Almost immediately after he left Jim had started his transformations and dealing with those had swallowed up nearly her entire life. By the time they'd managed to get Jim's transformations somewhat under control James had been gone for years, the anger and hurt had faded and the wound left by his departure had scabbed over, not healed but easy to ignore.

Then James had shown up from out of nowhere and torn it open fresh and bleeding. Emotions from ten years ago she hadn't let herself feel at the time spilling out, along with the fresh terror of what this could mean for Jim.

"I just…" her voice was small, hunched over against the table, desperate to keep the pieces of herself together "I just don't know what he's capable of,"

Things were silent for a few moments.

"That is a very rational fear," Dorrie leaned forward "And I would like to discuss some options about what we can do regarding the situation with him, but before we do I want to make one thing clear,"

The older woman laid both hands on the table and when she spoke again her voice was firmer than Barbara had ever heard from her "I don't like to use the word 'never' when it comes to family law, but James' chances at being granted any kind of custody are practically nonexistent,"

Something hot and not altogether unpleasant surged up in Barbara's chest, slowly peeking up at the woman across from her.

“He has had no contact with Jim for over ten years and has not contributed in any way financially,” Dorrie continued, crisp and clipped “Even if he were to start paying full child support right this minute, by the time he gets things on track enough for any judge to look at a plea for custody halfway seriously Jim will be eighteen,”

“That– that’s–” Barbara let out a shaky breath “That’s really good to hear,”

That might be the first completely honest thing she’d said tonight. She hadn’t looked too deeply into possible custody snafus, mainly to avoid working herself into a panic, but in the back of her mind the possibility was never far. Hearing an actual CPS worker say that there was no way of James getting his hands on Jim…it was a huge weight off her soul.

Dorrie gave a curt nod in response “Now there are several possible steps and safety measures we can take regarding your ex-husband. I’d like to go over them and see what might be best for your family’s situation,”

The echoes of relief and ripples of fresh anxiety swelled simultaneously within Barbara’s ribcage “Thank you, let’s…let’s do that,”

Reaching into her handbag Dorrie pulled out several pamphlets “For starters you should keep copies of your texts and all the correspondence James sends you, and based on the behavior he’s already shown it may be prudent to file a request for a restraining order…”

Barbara leaned forward, paying rapt attention as Dorrie laid out the legal processes, filing all her worries and doubts in the back of her mind.

CPS might be the second biggest threat to her and Jim's safety right now, but they had resources that she could use against the biggest threat. And unlike James; they operated by a logical set of rules, and Barbara could play their game by their rules and win.

James had already shot himself in the foot once with the stunt he pulled at the school, if Barbara played her cards right she could turn that against him and cut him from their lives without ever once having to see his face.

But what if one night he sees Jim before you can–

Barbara slammed the door in the back of her mind shut and forced herself to focus on nothing but Dorrie's voice.

She could do this. She'd taken care of Jim the past ten years. She'd been fighting tooth and nail against impossible odds to keep her baby safe for ten years. She could fight this battle to.

She was going to wrangle CPS and get them to back off, she would outmaneuver her ex-husband and excise him from their lives for good. It might not be easy, but nothing in the past ten years had been. Barbara had overcome then and she would overcome now.

She had to.

Chapter End Notes

> Dorrie takes her job very seriously, but she's also very aware of the limitations of the system she works in, and values the well-being of her families more than adhering to rules for their own sake. So when she hears about Jim going to a bonfire, she's not concerned about the rule breaking, rather she's happy to see him

expanding his social life and (what she believes to be) Barbara taking a step away from her controlling behavior.

I understand narratively why the city of Arcadia is practically surrounded by forests on all sides. They need a space where trolls and our other main characters can move around and have battles unseen. But why in-universe is Arcadia practically isolated by forests on all sides? The answer, almost all the land surrounding Arcadia has been declared city open space. Officially to preserve the environment and the natural beauty of the community, unofficially in the eighteen hundreds the Janus order arranged for the city open space to be created so Bular could have a way to skulk around Arcadia undetected.

And here we see how Barbara is handling the new normal. She knows that a lot of these changes are good for Jim, and is trying her hardest to do what's best for him. But Barbara is still stuck in the mindset of her vs the world, that it's entirely up to her to protect Jim and everyone else is an obstacle or a threat.

The thing is, there was a time when this mindset was a lot more rational. Back when Jim was five, when he was nowhere near capable of defending himself or even being at least partially responsible for his own safety, when Barbara's abandonment by James was still fresh and she'd only known Nana for a few months. In the early days Barbara was very much isolated and it makes more sense why she would view all other adults around her as potential threats to Jim's safety. But what was a rational fear ten years ago has grown into a paranoia that completely controls her.

Not only does this fear keep her from reaching out when she desperately needs help, even to people that genuinely want to help like Nancy and Dorrie, as a result of it she also has no emotional support. Much like Jim, Barbara deals with all her stress by bottling it up. And as we saw in Jim's case, bottling up everything he's feeling only results in everything bursting out in very unhealthy ways. Jim's had a few meltdowns of his own to get everything off his chest, and he has a much better emotional support system now. Barbara on the other hand is still keeping everything inside. She's had more practice bottling things up than Jim, which is why she hasn't had any breakdowns of her own yet. But when she reaches her own limit and ends up exploding, it's going to result in a much bigger bang.

Mary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Here ya go love,” food truck guy passed the bag down to her.

Mary reached up and accepted it “Thanks,”

Food truck guy might be one of the only strangers who could casually call her ‘Love’ without it sounding creepy at all, just plain friendly. But still, slippers and a bathrobe in public in broad daylight, not a fashion choice she would ever understand.

Mary balanced the bag in both arms and headed back towards the picnic tables, but not before dropping a few bills in the tip jar.

Reaching their table, the others sitting ready and waiting, Mary plunked the bag down in the middle.

“Lunch is served”

Not wasting a second, Mary shot a hand into the bag to snag her own burrito. No sooner than her hand was clear than everyone else started tearing through the bag. Mary leisurely plunked down on the wooded seat, calmly peeling the foil off her own burrito while the others scrambled for theirs.

She took a bite and chewed, lazily watching everyone else claim their food and settle into their seats to eat.

Mary waited until she was halfway finished with her burrito and everyone else had at least gotten a few bites into their own meals before speaking up.

“Since we’re all here let’s talk summer, today’s Monday, and we only have two weeks left until break starts, so we need to start planning now,”

Everyone paused in their chewing and glanced over at her, Toby swallowed what was in his mouth and spoke up.

“Do we really have to? I mean, it’s summer, we can just wing it,”

Mary narrowed her eyes, set down her burrito, and fixed him with her most piercing stare. Holding it without flinching, waiting until just as Toby was starting to squirm.

“We might not have school, but in the summer there’s going to be a lot of family vacations and trips and other stuff like that, so if we want to do things, especially with all five of us, we need to start planning *now* ,”

Toby held up a hand and scooted back “Withdrawn,”

Mary gave him one more sharp look before turning towards Claire “Is the party still on for Saturday?”

“Yep,” Claire beamed and pulled out her phone “Mom actually had Enrique last night,” she held out her phone, the screen filled with a

picture of her mom, skin shiny with sweat and greasy locks of hair pasted to her forehead, staring tenderly down at one wrinkly, red Enrique Nuñez swaddled in her arms.

Everyone squealed and cooed over just how cute Claire's new brother was, Mary taking advantage of the diversion to pull out her own phone while also 'aww'ing over baby Enrique.

Once Claire put her phone away and they all settled back, Mary had already pinned the event in next Saturday's schedule.

"So Darci, when are you leaving for your trips again?"

She puzzled over it for a second "I leave for New Orleans right after school ends, and I come back about halfway through June. I'm not exactly when we leave for Paris, I remember dad said I should still be able to do the cabin trip, but we'll have to leave like *right* after,"

Mary jerked a little at the reminder, even as she typed Darci's vacation dates into the group calendar. It was a good thing Darci brought it up, she'd been dragging her feet asking Jim about *that* for a while, and if she waited any longer it might be too late. Mary needed to bring it up *today* . But first…

"And Jim when do you leave for Salem?"

"A week from Saturday, first thing in the morning. And we won't be back till the end of June,"

Toby winced sympathetically "Bummer,"

Jim looked just as glum “Yeah I’m not looking forward to to it, but it’s…something ge have to do,”

Well that wasn’t heavy at all.

Everyone at the table squirmed and shifted awkwardly, the atmosphere suddenly ten times heavier. Mary laid her phone down and cleared her throat try and break the tension “So while we’re all there’s something I want to ask–”

“Actually,” Toby cut in “Do you mind if I bring up something else first?”

Normally Mary *hated* when people interrupted her, but she was curious at what was so important Toby would cut in. And if she was honest, relieved that the big question would be delayed a bit “Sure, what?”

“So Jim and I were talking….”

He briefly met eyes with Jim, who gave him a single nod.

“We were thinking of having a sleepover, with all five of us,”

“Yeah, mom says it’s ok,” Jim picked up “And I think…I think I’m ready,”

For a moment all Mary could do was blink at him.

She'd thought things had been going really well. Their hangouts had been getting less and less awkward, and aside from one little hiccup that ended up being no big deal, their bonfire had been a blast. But hearing Jim say he was ready to have all of them over in a big slumber party caught her off guard.

More than anything Mary had been trying to avoid rushing Jim into something he was uncomfortable with, but it looked like Jim was making pretty good progress all on his own.

"Oh, ok," she slowly picked her phone back up "You have any nights in mind?"

"Not really no, we were wondering what you guys thought,"

Claire leaned forward, frowning slightly "Well…I don't think we can do this weekend, at least not with all of us, I'm going to be busy with the party for Enrique,"

"And plus after that, me and Jim are going to be on vacation for a good chunk of June," Darci added.

Toby's face fell "Oh, I forgot about that…"

He trailed off, uncomfortable silence settled over the five of them.

Jim gave a strained smile "It's ok, I've waited this long for a sleepover

already, I can wait until July…”

Mary bit her lip, tapping her screen thoughtfully, turning over the idea for only a few more seconds before speaking up “You know…we might be able to do a sleepover next Wednesday,”

Everyone looked up at her sharply.

“Think about it, I mean yeah it’s a school night, but the last of our finals are that morning, and there’s no basically no classes on Thursday, just another pep rally and the museum trip. So why not run the idea of a Wednesday to Thursday sleepover to our folks?”

They all glanced around at each other, excitement slowly dawning on their faces.

“Yeah,” Toby’s mouth stretched into an ecstatic grin “Let’s try it, the worst they can do is say no,”

“I guess I could try to convince my mom…” Jim said slowly.

“I’ll ask my parents to,” Claire set her jaw, steely glint to her eyes “I’ll convince them,”

Darci eagerly nodded along with that “Yeah, like you said there’s no real class on Thursday, and this will be our last chance for all five of us to hang out until July,”

Mary felt a grin tugging at the edges of her mouth, thrill of

anticipation bubbling up in her chest “Great, I’ll mark it down as a maybe, let me know what your parents all say,”

“Ok,”

“Got it,”

“Sounds good,”

“Will do,”

Finishing her typing, Mary slid her phone into her pocket. She was still nervous about bringing this up, Jim had been doing so much better and she didn’t want to do anything to throw a wrench in that. But if Jim had straight up started planning a sleepover with all of them, he should be able to handle being asked about this.

And that’s all she was doing, asking, and if the answer was no she’d accept it and move on.

“So…every year my aunt and uncle have this party towards the end of July…”

Darci and Claire started a bit, looks like they’d already figured out where Mary was headed with this.

“They have it at their vacation cabin up in the Sierra Nevadas,” she continued “They invite a bunch of people to come. Me and my moms are going, you guys can all come to if you want,”

Toby perked up “Ok that sounds–”

“The thing is…” she drummed her fingers against the table “The drive there is super long, so…we usually stay there overnight,”

Dead silence settled over the table, Jim blinking at her owlishly.

“So yeah what we usually do is go up Friday, spend Friday and Saturday there, and come home Sunday morning,” Mary knew she was rambling to try and shake off the obvious tension“If that’s something you’re interested in,”

Jim looked like a deer in headlights “I…I mean if it’s a family thing, I don’t want to impose–”

“You won’t,” Mary waved him off “Lots of non-family people are invited, Darc and C-Bomb have been coming every year since we were ten, my cousins bring their roommates, one year my grandpa even brought a guy he met at the bus stop. Basically my aunt and uncle like having a big huge party every year, and they’re not too picky about who comes,”

Jim chewed his lip, nails digging into the elbows of his jacket “But how can I– overnight, with me being all…..you know,”

“I…thought about that,” Mary leaned forward onto her folded arms “Lots of people who stay overnight camp in the woods, we could set up a tent for you far away from everyone else where you can hide out after dark, or figure something else out if you want,” she fought to make sure her voice stayed light and upbeat “If you do want to come we’ll help you, but if you don’t want to come that’s ok, if it’s too much

or you just don't want to I completely understand,”

“I…I need to think about it,”

No clear answer, but it looked like asking had gone over ok. That had gone better than Mary was worried it would, a *lot* better “Ok, let me know when you decide,” she turned towards Darci “You have the exact dates for your New Orleans trip?”

“We leave next Friday and we come back the morning of June 16th,”

Mary nodded along as she typed it into the calendar “And Jim you leave for Massachusetts the day after Darci leaves, and you’ll be back before June’s over but you’re not sure when,”

“Yep, that pretty much sums it up,”

“Ok, the waterpark opens Memorial day weekend–”

“You guys can go without me,” Darci cut in “I don’t mind,”

“Same here,” Jim added.

Mary nodded at the two of them before looking back down at her phone “Got it, thanks. But it looks like the Summer Festival starts the last week of June, you guys think you’ll be back in town for that?”

“I…think so,” Jim said slowly.

“I should be for sure,”

“Great,” Mary turned towards Claire to ask her if she needed to go with her mom to the Fair’s opening ceremony, and to see if Claire would rather they join in solidarity or help her slip away, but the words never left her mouth.

For a moment Mary couldn’t move, frozen in her seat staring with her jaw hanging open. But not at Claire, but at what– or more specifically who she saw over her shoulder.

“Shit.”

They all jolted at hearing her curse, Claire scooting towards her, eyebrows crinkled in concern “What’s wrong?”

No time to explain, with the way he was scoping out the park it was only a matter of time until he spotted them. And after what he tried last time there was no way in hell Mary was letting him get in a twenty foot radius of them,.

“We gotta go,” she scrambled out of her seat “ *Now.* ”

No one moved, gaping up at her faces awash with confusion. Toby frowned “But wh–”

“James is here, we need to scram before he spots us,”

The second the words left her mouth all their expressions went from confusion to panic as fast as flicking on a lightswitch. Jim had it the worst, jaw gaping open, every speck of color draining from his skin.

They all shot out of their seats, leaving what was left of their lunches and heading straight towards the edge of the park. Hopefully if they moved quick they could slip away before–

“Hey! Hey you kids!”

Shit shit shit

Mary sped up her power walk to a near jog, the others keeping pace as they moved towards the crosswalk. She didn’t dare risk a glance back until they were in the middle of the street. A quick peek over her shoulder revealed James was still a ways behind them, but was jogging in their direction and closing the gap rapidly.

Mary pretended she hadn’t noticed “Ok guys,” she said in a low voice “As soon as we reach the sidewalk, Run.”

The looks they gave her at that were terrified, but they nodded all the same.

It took everything Mary had to keep moving at a steady pace, adrenaline surging and every hair on the back of her neck prickling, heart threatening to beat out of her chest. The only reason she was even somewhat able to hold it together was knowing that she was with a group on a busy street, not all alone in a deserted hallway.

The five of them kept up their same pace as they approached the

street corner, then, the second their shoes hit cement, they all broke into a run.

From behind, far too close for comfort, she heard James shouting after them “Hey wait! I just want to talk!”

They ignored him and kept sprinting along the sidewalk, dodging past trees and trash cans and other pedestrians. Running and running as fast as they possibly could.

But not fast enough.

“Guys he’s gaining!” Toby called out “We’ll never get back to school before he catches us!”

“We don’t need to make it back to school,” Darci shouted back, panting “Just somewhere secure,”

“Yeah but where!?”

“Here!” Claire pivoted, turning a sharp corner down a side street leaving the rest of them scrambling to follow her.

Part of Mary wanted to ask Claire just where exactly she was going, but the bigger part of her knew to run now and ask questions later.

They sprinted for another block and a half, making several turns through alleys and side streets, Mary not even daring to glance behind her. Then Claire abruptly skidded to a stop in front of a store and

dashed inside, the rest of them following so close on her heels they nearly ran into her. Mary had just enough time to read the sign above them ‘GDT Arcane Books’ as she raced in, Darci slamming the door shut behind them.

The store looked like one of those small, indie bookshops. With cozy looking couches, stairs leading to a loft, and a fireplace strangely enough. Behind the counter the clerk, a tall skinny guy with blue streaked hair, jumped at the commotion, a black cat lounging on the desk leaping up with a yowl, landing on the carpet on all fours with hackles raised.

Apparently this was the type of bookstore where there was a cat or cats who had free run of the place.

Blue haired counter guy recovered and stepped around the counter towards them “What’s all the–”

“There’s a creepy guy after us,” Claire said without preamble.

The guy got serious instantly “Go into the stockroom,” he gestured to a narrow door behind him, holding out a keychain in the other hand “Here’s the key, it’s the only copy and the door deadbolts shut from the inside, go inside and lock yourselves in,”

Mary spared him a quick nod of thanks before snatching the key and racing into the room behind the others, almost immediately having to scramble to a stop as she did. Calling it a room was a bit generous, it was slightly smaller than the average walk-in closet, the already limited space cluttered but boxes and stacks of books, lit by a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

But it had enough space for all five of them and a locking door, and

that's what counted.

As soon as she came through Toby slammed the door shut behind her and latched the deadbolt into place.

No one moved, the sudden quiet and confinement unsettling after their frenzied race through the street. The only sounds the five of them panting for breath and the hum of the lightbulb dangling overhead. None of them dared to speak, buzzing with adrenaline, tensed and waiting for something to happen at any moment. The taut silence stretched out to a minute, then one minute became two. Breathing started to slow and shoulders started to lower. Mary forcibly uncurled her fingers, the stinging of nails against palms fading. Looks like they'd managed to shake–

Muffled shouts came from just outside the door. Each of them going stiff and whipping their gaze towards the door.

Curiosity winning out over caution, Mary took a hesitant step towards the door, standing on her tippy toes to peek through the narrow frosted glass window. The blurry image of James was in front of the counter and the blurry image of blue hair was behind it. Their voices were muffled by the door, but not so muffled she couldn't understand them.

"Look I just need to talk to my son,"

"I already told you he's not here,"

"I *saw* him and his friends run in here,"

“Let me put it this way,” blue hair folded his arms “Even if they were here I’m not letting you see them,”

James paced furiously in front of the counter, both hands going up to tangle in his hair “This is ridiculous, Jim is my son, I’m not going to hurt him or anything, I just want to talk,”

“I don’t care, either you leave or I’m calling the cops,”

“Oh come on! He’s my kid!”

“Actually I’m calling the cops right now,” blue hair pulled out his phone “I won’t force you to stay but you aren’t seeing those kids,”

Even through the foggy glass she could see James’ face turn purple “Alright that is *it!* ” he slammed a fist against the counter, Mary jerking back involuntarily “Jim is *my* son and I have a *right* to see him! And I’m not going to let myself get pushed around any more, especially some stuck up broke ass punk–”

The conversation, if you could even call it that, degraded into James spitting insults at the guy, Mary ducked back down and took a peek at the others behind her. Claire was right up against the window next to her while Toby was crouched below them with an ear pressed against the door. Darci stood fidgeting in the middle of the room, glancing back and forth between her phone in her hands and the door in front of her, Jim was sitting on the floor up against the far side of the closet staring at nothing, face a vacant mask.

Wait…now that she thought about it, Jim hadn’t said a peep since they’d booked it from the park. And considering it was technically his *dad* out there…..

As freaked as the rest of them were right now she couldn't even imagine what Jim was going through.

Mary took half a step away from the door "You doing ok Jim?"

It took him a few seconds to respond "Oh– yeah, I'm fine,"

She blinked at him, then moved her gaze over to Toby, Claire, and Darci in that order, each of them looking equally unsettled by that response.

Jim winced and pinched the bridge of his nose "Actually…no, I'm– I'm not fine, I'm just…tired,"

Ok, Mary herself was feeling a lot of different things right now, mostly in some category of stressed or freaked out. But 'tired' didn't fit in there anywhere.

But emotions were weird and didn't always make sense, and at least Jim wasn't pretending he was ok when he wasn't and he was actually telling them what was wrong.

"Well just hang tight, there's no way he's getting to us in here, and the shop guy's calling the cops,"

Jim's only response was to nod.

All of a sudden the sounds of commotion in the store got even louder. Mary pivoting back around towards the window. Outside in the shop James was having both hands pulled behind his back by a man in a police officer's uniform, who then hauled him out the door and out of sight while blue hair and another police officer stood and watched.

"Wow," Claire muttered "That was quick,"

"Actually I texted my dad, he said he would send someone straight over,"

They all turned to stare at Darci, who fidgeted under their gazes "And I texted the rest of our parents to,"

"Oh,"

There was a soft knock at the closet door "You guys can come out now," blue hair's voice "That guy got arrested and he's gone now,"

Toby undid the deadbolt and opened the door just a crack, peeking out at blue hair suspiciously "He really got arrested just for chasing us?"

"Actually he had an outstanding warrant on him,"

Toby opened the door the rest of the way "Yeah that checks out,"

They all hesitantly crept out of the closet, the police officer stepping up to them "Ok kids let's try to get in touch with your parents and

then–”

The front door slammed open, everyone in the room jumping at the sound and whirling around to see–

“Mo!?” Mary squeaked out.

Catching sight of her Mo rushed forward, letting the door slam shut behind her, and scooped Mary up in a powerful bear hug, that, after a few moments, Mary returned out of reflex.

Darci did say that she texted all their parents, and Mo’s office was downtown, and it was exactly like Mo to run all the way over here.

“Are you ok baby?”

Mary nodded as best she could with her face crushed against Mo’s blouse “Y– yeah, I’m fine,”

Mo turned and surveyed the rest of them “Are any of you hurt? Do you need to lie down, something to drink?”

“No,”

“Nu uh,”

“Nope,”

“I’m good,”

Mo gave a single nod of satisfaction at that. From the corner of her vision Mary could see blue hair locking the front door and switching the ‘Open’ sign to ‘Closed’.

Pulling back, but not loosening her grip on Mary, Mo fixed the officer with a piercing stare “Are you who I talk to about pressing charges?”

“Oh– uh, yes,”

“Good because I am *definitely* pressing charges, it was bad enough when that man broke into the school to harass my daughter, this has gone on too far, I–”

“Uh, Mo, could you…”

Mo glanced down, as if just now remembering she had Mary locked in her arms.

“Oh, yes sorry sweetie,” she finally released her, giving Mary one more once over just to confirm she was as ‘fine’ as she said she was “You kids just hang tight, the *adults* will handle this,”

She moved over towards the officer “To start with I want to make sure to press charges for criminal harassment of a minor…”

The conversation between the two adults quickly devolved into an exchange of legal jargon, leaving the five of them standing there in the lurch.

"Why don't you guys take a seat?" blue hair spoke up, pointing behind him with his thumb "Take a breather while we wait for the rest of your folks to get here,"

Mary barely managed to nod in response, somehow exhausted and keyed up at the same time, the five of them walking over and soundlessly flopping onto the couch, Mo's animated discussion with the officer a dull hum in her ears.

They were safe now. James had been hauled away and Mo was pressing charges, she was going to make sure he didn't get away with this. Maybe Dr. Lake would press charges to and maybe she wouldn't, but Claire's mom and Darci's dad *definitely* would. They wouldn't let James keep going after them.

Mary leaned back into the plush fabric of the couch, staring into the fireplace in a numb haze. They were safe now, she knew that, adrenaline draining away, but now that the panic was gone bone crushing exhaustion had taken its place.

Pressing charges meant paperwork, and taking statements, and waiting for all their parents to get here so they could have them all go over their story again both separately and together. All of which would almost certainly eat up the rest of the day.

She'd have to remind Mo to call the school and let them know that they weren't going to be there for the rest of their classes.

Mary blinked at the flickering fireplace, utterly wrung out.

She knew that pressing charges against James was the right thing to do, it was the only way to stop him for good. She knew that, but right now more than anything Mary just wanted to be in her own bedroom of her own house forgetting the past half hour ever happened. And as exhausted as she felt….

Glancing over to the far side of the couch she caught a glimpse of Jim hanging his head, hair obscuring his expression.

Suddenly feeling tired made a lot more sense.

The droning of Mo and the police officer's voices washing over her, Mary scrolled her eyes back over to the fireplace, which had to be artificial now that she thought about it. The cat had crept out from wherever it had been hiding and seated itself on the rug in front of the couch, surveying the five of them with an unblinking yellow gaze.

Chapter End Notes

> I've mentioned Mary's parents before but never gone into a lot of detail. She's the bio-kid of two moms; a cisgendered lesbian (Mo) and a pansexual trans woman (Mom), both of whom are American born Chinese. Mary's moms don't have much of an onscreen role in this story, but they will play a larger part later into the sequel.
>
> Here we see the escalation of James' behavior. He says he cares about his family and just wants to reconcile, but his actions tell a very different story. James refuses to respect boundaries, and when those boundaries are forcibly imposed he views that as being bullied and picked on, not that he's actually the one in the wrong. Additionally he broke the law by trespassing at the school. And I'll be the first to get on a soapbox and say that illegal =/= immoral; but in the states, with all the incidents in recent years, breaking into a school is something you do not fucking do.
>
> Furthermore, we see that when he doesn't get his way James is quick to lash out both verbally and violently; shouting insults and

slamming a fist on the counter. This combined with his massive sense of entitlement and refusal to take responsibility for his actions makes him incredibly dangerous.

Claire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hola hermanito, you excited for your party?”

Enrique blinked up at her sleepily. His weight resting comfortably on her lap, head tucked into the crook of her elbow.

“We have the whole family here, all our friends and even some of mom’s coworkers,” she carefully slid her arm further under him, pulling Enrique close to her belly without jostling him “All here just to see you,”

His eyelids fluttered, shutting them once again as he settled back into her lap.

Claire felt a grin tugging at her face “Popular already aren’t you?” she cooed down at her brand new baby brother.

Ever since he’d come home from the hospital Enrique hadn’t done much besides eat and sleep. Not that Claire was complaining, she’d heard horror stories about babies crying nonstop, so having Enrique being so quiet was a blessing. But according to that nurse as babies got older and had more energy…

Well for the summer at least she’d be able to spend most of her time outside the house, and hopefully whatever loud crying phase he had was over by the time school started.

He yawned, eyelids squeezing together and tiny nose crinkling up, Claire's chest fluttering as her heart practically ached with the tenderness surging through it.

Claire had been an only child for so long that when she'd first been given the news, she hadn't known quite how to feel about getting a new sibling, then a bunch of other stuff had happened that pulled most of her focus over the past several months. So she'd only had the mental space to worry about the birth going ok for most of her mom's pregnancy.

She'd still been uncertain when her dad picked her up after school to visit mom and Enrique in the hospital. But then when they'd handed her Enrique in his swaddled up bundle and she'd looked into his eyes for the first time, Claire had been hit by an overpowering wave of love and affection.

Claire wasn't an only child any more, she had a little brother, and she loved him with all her heart.

Even all the bad things that were supposed to happen to older kids when the family got a new baby either didn't happen or turned out to not be a problem.

Sure now that he was born her parents were paying a lot more attention to Enrique than her, but he was a *baby* . Of course he got more attention when he literally couldn't do anything for himself. And it wasn't like Claire had been desperate for her parents' attention before, more than anything she was relieved to have them off her back. Final exams were coming up but her parents were so busy with Enrique they hadn't once hounded her about studying.

And one of the things Claire had started worrying about when she first saw mom and Enrique in the hospital, being permanently stuck on

babysitting duty, ended up being shot down on the drive home. When that woman in Dairy Queen had come up to them and told them how adorable Enrique was and how nice it was that they had Claire to help take care of him.

Ophelia had *lost* it.

Screaming at the woman how parentifying is a problem that cripples kids' futures and that Claire's one and only responsibility was to keep her grades up and Ophelia would be responsible for Enrique because she 'Wasn't a lazy waste of space who had children she refused to take care of'.

Claire had been massively relieved to hear her mom say that, followed by completely mortified immediately after. She'd grabbed the ice cream and booked it back to the car while her dad pulled her mom away after throwing a few twenties at the petrified cashier.

Later that night Ophelia had made them both swear to never let her leave the house while on pain medication, no matter how badly she was craving ice cream.

Her parents were too busy to nag her, she wasn't going to become a live-in babysitter, and Enrique was the cutest, sweetest little baby she'd even seen.

At the beginning Claire hadn't known how to feel about getting a new baby in the family, but now, holding him in her arms, she knew that Enrique was the best thing to happen to their family in a long time.

The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs pulled her attention, tearing her gaze away from Enrique to see her parents stepping into the room.

“Thanks for watching him while your mother and I got ready,” Javier approached, arms outstretched to accept Enrique, Ophelia trailing right behind him.

“No problem,” Claire carefully lifted Enrique up off her lap, allowing her papi to scoop him up and cradle him to his chest, sleeping expression not even twitching “I’ll be out in a bit, I just want wait for my friends to get here so I can let them in,”

Instantly her parents' faces dropped, turning towards each other and sharing a look.

Her guts curdled.

Uh oh, Claire knew that look, nothing good ever came from that look.

“About that…” her mom stepped forward “We were talking about the sleepover you want to do on Wednesday…”

Claire’s stomach pinched, this was it, they were going to tell her that there was no way she was doing a sleepover on a school night, even if they weren’t doing any actual school the next day. She knew this was coming, they may have said that they’d thinking about it but she knew there was no way that they would ever let her–

“You can go,”

Claire blinked, not sure she’d heard that correctly “Wait really?”

“Yes,” her papi stepped up to join her mom, gently bouncing Enrique in his arms “You don’t have any classes the next day, so it should be fine,”

“ *However* ,” Ophelia cut in, folding both arms across her chest “This sleepover is a privilege just like any other, not only do we expect you to be on your best behavior at all times, if you get into any trouble or let your performance in class slack, even that Wednesday morning, we–”

Claire surged forward, ensnaring both her parents, and her baby brother, in a powerful hug.

“Thank you thank you thank you! I promise I’ll study hard and I won’t let you down!”

Her mom stiffened before reaching an arm around to pat Claire on the shoulder “Oh, yes, very good,”

Claire released them and stepped back, still buzzing with giddy energy, allowing her parents to head straight into the backyard to greet the waiting guests now that they had said what they needed to and were free of her bear hug.

But they didn’t, instead they stayed where they were, sharing another look.

Papi cleared his throat “Now remember, if you get uncomfortable or want to leave you can call us any time, even at two in the morning,”

Claire frowned “Oh…ok,”

Were her parents nervous about her spending the night over at a boy’s house? Granted she’d had several sleepovers with Toby already but none at his house. And why were they giving this whole talk after they’d already said she could g–

“And I know that Dr. Lake will be the adult there, and you should listen to her,” Ophelia pressed her hands together “But if she tells you to do something that goes against your…insincts, you just stick with your best judgment over what she says,”

Claire felt her face fall, confusion smoothing into cool understanding, an ice cold weight dropping in the pit of her gut.

So that’s what this was about.

“And call us,” Javier added, nodding enthusiastically “You can always call us, if you or *any* or any of your friends need help,”

Guts still roiling, Claire forced herself to nod, even though she intended to do no such thing, at least not any time before sunrise “Got it, will do,”

Her parents nodded back at her, sharing one more conspiratorial look before heading out of the room. Claire waited for a few seconds, then when she heard the backdoor open and shut she let out a deep breath and flopped back against the couch.

Talk about a reminder she *didn’t* need.

The five of them might have buried the hatchet, with things between them getting better and better by the day, but that didn't change the fact that Dr. Lake's reputation was still in the dumpster. With half the town, her own parents included, thinking she was a monster. Add in the fact that the reason people thought that was due in a direct result of Claire's own actions and you had a double whammy of guilt.

Claire pressed a hand to her belly, intestines twisting up tighter and tighter. She wanted, more than anything, to set the story straight and clear Dr. Lake's name, but there wasn't any way to come clean, even to her parents, without giving away Jim's secret.

Which was *not* an option.

Not to mention Dr. Lake had made it *very* clear she didn't want them meddling. And as guilty as she felt Claire wasn't going to go behind her back and do something she'd explicitly asked them not to do.

Again, *not* an option. That particular lesson had been hammered into her skull more than a few times.

Which left her here, stuck between a rock and a hard place. It still didn't feel right to let people go around thinking Dr. Lake was an evil witch who locked her son in the basement, but there wasn't anything she could actually do without making the whole situation worse.

Out of nowhere the doorbell rang, startling Claire out of her thoughts. She jumped to her feet, gloomy thoughts banished from her mind, and hurried to go open it, revealing four familiar faces.

"Hey guys," she pulled the door open wide "Glad you could make it,"

Darci beamed at her and brandished a shiny silver pan “We brought casserole!”

“And diapers,” Mary added, shaking a green and yellow gift bag.

“I’ve got Nana’s famous tuna surprise,” Toby bustled around her, pan in hand and his own gift bags dangling from his arm “Fair warning I’m pretty sure this is what the cafeteria based their chicken surprise on, and I also brought the baby blanket Nana knitted,”

Quick as a flash Mary slipped the dish in her hands on top of the tower of pans in Jim’s arms, darting up to Claire and throwing both arms around her “Congrats on being a big sis now C-Bomb, how does it feel?”

Claire smiled and squeezed her back “It hasn’t even been a week yet, but I would both die and kill for him,”

Jim carefully stepped inside, peeking over the tower of aluminum and plastic in his arms “How is the new little bro doing?”

“Great, come see for yourselves,”

Claire lead them into the spare bedroom at the back of the house, where their gift bags and boxes joined the others in the mountain on the bed, gathering at the large window looking out to a full view of the backyard. The entire fenced in space had been set up with pastel colored streamers and balloons. The most impressive of which was a massive banner that read ‘Welcome home Enrique Nuñez’. Dozens of people milled around the yard, every inch of the picnic table covered in various foods and dishes, her papi standing ready at the grill

keeping a close watch on his precious chorizo. At the center of it all was her mom, leaning back in a reclining lawn chair with Enrique swaddled on her lap, flanked on either side by each of Claire's abuelas.

" *OMG! He's so cute!* " Toby set his pan in Jim's arms and scurried towards the window "Quick question, am I going to have to fight your grandmas if I want to hold Enrique?"

Claire chuckled "No, but it's probably a good idea to ask their permission,"

Adding her own pan to Jim's pile, now completely blocking him from view, Darci joined Toby at the window with a squeal "He is so *adorable* !"

"When did I become the designated food holder?" Jim grumbled from behind the mountain of casseroles.

"When you said that none of us could be trusted with phyllo dough," Mary said without missing a beat, siding up to Claire to survey the window at a distance.

Jim mumbled something, carefully setting his pans on a side table before heading to the window himself.

Toby's nose was less than an inch away from the glass, eyes wide as he surveyed the crowd milling around the yard "This is a lot of people, is your entire family here?"

"Pretty much, almost everyone in my mom's lives in Pasadena so they

were all able to come no problem, and nearly all of my dad's family made a point to fly in. Most of them will be going back to San Ángel in a few days, but my abuelita's staying in town for about a month,"

"It's cool you have such a big family," Jim said, with just a trace of wistfulness.

Claire very deliberately ignored his tone and just focused on the spoken words "Yeah they're all pretty cool, I just wish my tías and primas would stop teasing me about getting a boyfriend,"

"And it's cool that both sides of your family all get along together," Darci added.

"Why…wouldn't they…" Toby said slowly, turning away from the window to face Darci.

"Oh! It's not Claire's family, it's mine," Darci turned around until her back was to the window, gaze sweeping over the four of them "My mom's family and my dad's family don't like each other, have I never told you guys this?"

"No,"

"Nope,"

Claire and Mary stayed silent, they had been given this whole rundown back in middle school, for them this was nothing new, but it looked like the boys hadn't been brought up to speed yet.

“So you know my mom died when I was a baby?”

“Yeah,”

“Uh huh,”

“Well what happened was my mom and dad were originally living in New Orleans where my mom’s family is, then when I was three months old they came to Arcadia to visit my dad’s family and while they were here my mom died in a car crash,”

Toby’s eyes got huge, jaw dropping open “But that’s…that’s not your dad’s fault, how could he have possibly–”

“Oh no,” Darci held up her hands, alarm flashing across her face “They’re not mad about that, they know it was an accident. The reason my mom’s family got mad was because my dad decided to stay in Arcadia,”

“Ah,”

“So yeah things were tense for a long time and they didn’t really have anything to do with each other and I didn’t see a lot of my mom’s family until I was five,” Darci leaned against the window, hugging her elbows, the words all coming out in a rush “But anyways that was all a long time ago, so no one’s super mad about that anymore and they all talk to each other now, but they’re still not super friendly,”

Jim winced “That sounds…tough,”

“I mean…they don’t hate each other,” Darci shrugged with forced casualness, avoiding meeting anyone's eyes “They’ll be polite at airports and restaurants and stuff, but hosting a party together, no way,”

She trailed off, heavy, awkward silence filling the room, the small space quickly becoming claustrophobic.

All of a sudden Mary darted up towards the window, elbowing Toby and Darci aside to come right up to the glass “Hey Claire, are those your cousins?”

“Yes but remember, no flirting with them,”

“I never agreed to that!” Mary shouted back at her as she hurried out the door. Almost immediately after Toby and Darci broke away and headed out themselves.

“Love to help you put the casseroles away but I want to go visit Enrique before a line starts,”

“Same,” Darci turned back just long enough to wink at Claire, letting her know that she wasn’t actually sorry at all. The two of them vanished through the doorway, seconds later the sound of the backdoor opening and shutting echoed into the room, leaving just Claire and Jim alone in the house.

Clearing her throat, Claire turned and picked up a stack of pans off the side table “I’ll load these up in the fridge and be out in a minute, you can go ahead and–”

Jim swooped in and grabbed the last few pans “It’s fine, I’ll give you a hand. Besides, I want to make sure my phyllo dough is taken care of,”

The two of them headed into the kitchen, Claire setting the pans on the counter to open the fridge door. She moved to grab a pan, but Jim swooped and held one out to her, allowing her to slide it into the fridge before he immediately handed her the next one, setting up a silent assembly line.

This was the first time the two of them were alone together for more than a minute or two in months.

With no danger of interruptions.

As soon as the realization hit her the wasps nest that had been buzzing in the back of Claire’s head, a quiet hum for the past four months that had been getting steadily louder over the past few weeks, was kicked over.

Claire discreetly sucked in a breath and tried to pull herself together, but her mind had latched onto the idea and refused to let it go. And despite her best effort to suck them down, the words–

Do you want to go out sometime, just the two of us?

Tickled in the back of her throat, ready and waiting to be let out.

Their hands brushed against each other as he handed off the pan, Claire turned away, heat filling her cheeks, forcing herself not to squirm as the beginnings of butterflies fluttered in her stomach. If only the others hadn’t bailed so qui–

Wait did they set this up!? Leaving her and Jim alone in the house together ‘so Claire could tell him how she really felt’.

Mary would to.

She bit her lip so hard it hurt, chest going tight. Whether or not this was a setup didn’t matter, the outcome was the same. Jim was only inches away and no one else was around.

There was nothing stopping Claire from telling him, right here right now, all the feelings for him that she’d been bottling up for months.

To say that she liked spending time with him in their group, but sometimes she wanted him all to herself. To hold him close and forget that the rest of the world existed.

The sharp, metal edge of the pan in her hands cut into her hands as she tightened her grip, the taste of blood filling her mouth.

But she couldn’t– wouldn’t. Not because she was worried that Jim would say he didn’t feel the same way about her, but because she knew he would say that he did.

“So…” Claire said slowly, turning away from the fridge “Mom had Enrique in May so she wouldn’t be super pregnant in late summer, but she had me in December so she wouldn’t have to take care of a newborn during an election,”

Jim blinked at her “Oh, you were…planned,”

Claire's entire face ignited in a hot flush. Willing the earth to open up and swallow her whole.

"Oh, yeah, right,"

Stupid stupid stupid!

Forcing her limbs into action, Claire snagged the pan from Jim's outstretched hands and snapped around to jerkily slide it into the fridge.

Well she'd wanted to keep things from getting too intimate, mission accomplished alright.

They put the last few dishes away in silence, Claire having to rearrange a few pans to shut the stuffed fridge behind her, only turning back around to face Jim when she was sure her skin tone wasn't crimson. Task complete, the two of them shuffled awkwardly at the counter for a few seconds, then Jim cleared his throat.

"So how is it having a new baby bro?"

Claire let out a small sigh of relief, then gave a casual shrug of her shoulders "I love him, and he's adorable and everything, but he's a baby, he can't really do anything besides eat and sleep. Mainly it's the stuff he can do when he's older I'm looking forward to,"

"What kind of stuff?"

“Teaching him his first words, his first steps, the complete works of the immortal bard, you know sibling things,”

Jim couldn’t have known, but he chuckled all the same, Claire joined him in laughter.

“Thanks again for bringing all this,” she gestured towards the fridge “We have enough meals that my parents shouldn’t have to cook through the entire fourth trimester,”

Jim gave a soft smile and looked away, running a hand through his hair “It wasn’t a big deal, I’m already awake for most of the night, might as well kill time by making a bunch of casseroles,”

He turned back towards her and laughed again, but this time there was a forced edge to the sound, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

Claire’s throat tightened, even as she willed her expression to stay neutral.

They’d all been hanging out again for several weeks and for the most part things were good, but there were times when Jim laughed just a little too loudly, when his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

When he seemed so unsure.

They’d come a long ways, all of them, but Jim still had far to go.

He never said as much, but one look in his eyes and Claire could see just how scared Jim still was. Scared of being alone. Scared that his cursed form would drive them away.

It wouldn't, regardless of what Jim looked like or what he ate they'd all still be there for him. But they hadn't built up enough trust for Jim to fully believe them when they said it.

Claire knew that if she asked him out, right here and now, Jim would say yes. Regardless of whether he actually wanted to date her or not. Because he was still so terrified of any of them leaving that he would do whatever they asked in order to make sure they stayed.

Jim would absolutely force himself to date her, even if he didn't want to. Smothering his true feelings and bending over backwards to keep from losing the only friends he had.

And Claire cared too much about him to ever put him in that position.

"Well we appreciated it, having meals taken care of is a huge help,"

Jim smiled back at her, nearly managing to conceal the relief washing over his face "Well uh…I'm going to go outside and meet the new little bro," he turned and took a step towards the backdoor "You coming?"

"In a bit," Claire leaned up against the sink "I have to compose myself before getting ready for the tías,"

"Ok then, see you out there," Jim waved back at her as he stepped out of the room. Claire returned the gesture with a grin and a wave of her

own. She heard the backdoor open and shut, leaving her alone in the kitchen, wave slowing to a stop and smile falling off her face.

Now she was alone, just her and her emotions.

Her many many conflicting, contradictory emotions.

The worst part of all of this was she knew she could be ok being just friends with Jim. If he said he only liked her as a friend, it would sting, but she could get over it. He was a good friend, a great one, and Claire knew that once the bandaid was ripped off the hurt would fade and they could recover and stay friends without things getting weird.

But the only way Claire could even get that closure was by asking him, and she knew if she asked him he wouldn't say no, even if he really wanted to deep down. He was so scared of upsetting their fragile, budding friendships he'd go along with whatever she asked.

Whatever any of them asked.

Claire pressed a hand against her stomach to abate the queasy feeling now surging back in full force. Every time she thought about how much of a pushover Jim had been the past few weeks she was hit by a fresh wave of guilt and something thorny she couldn't identify.

She wanted to date Jim, she did, she really did, but only if he liked her to, not because he was afraid of her leaving him and the fallout shattering their group.

So that left her here, stuck.

She shut her eyes, willing the rolling in her abdomen to subside.

There had to be a solution to this puzzle, something she just wasn't seeing.

She liked Jim, as a friend and maybe more, and she wanted to know if he felt the same way.

But Jim was still so nervous around them that he would never say no, so how could she get him to voice his true feelings when he was still so insecure even after weeks of–

Her breath hitched.

That was the answer, time.

Jim was still pretty nervous around them, but even in just the last two weeks he'd gotten so much better. Last week they'd had a bonfire when before he would never leave his house, next week they were all going to have a sleepover together.

He'd come so far already, maybe one day soon he'd be confident enough to be able to tell her no

Or yes

And mean it.

Excitement fluttered up in her chest, blasting the nausea away as a plan started falling into place in her mind. Claire didn't want to keep bottling up her feelings forever. But she wouldn't have to do it forever. Jim was getting more and more sure of himself by the day, and one day soon he'd be in a good enough place for her to ask. But when?

Dates and numbers flashed behind her eyes. How long it had been since Jim had come clean, how far he'd come since, all the trips and plans they'd made for the summer.

Summer. August. The start of the next school year. By then he should have enough self confidence for her to safely ask him out.

Claire pulled a breath in and let it out, expelling the rest of her emotions, and released the sink, feeling infinitely better now that she had a plan of action. Right now she wasn't going to worry about her and Jim, she would deal with all that when the next school year started. She'd revisit her feelings on the first day of sophomore year and not a minute sooner. Claire wasn't going to spend her summer worrying and working herself into a lather. This summer was just going to be about having fun with her friends, all of them, and her new little brother.

She headed towards the backdoor, all the stress sinking down further and further into the bottoms of her feet, feeling lighter with each step.

The time for worries and confessions would be later. Claire wasn't going to think about any of that right now. Right now all that mattered was that all of her friends were doing well and getting better by the day; Enrique was here, safe and healthy, and her parents were so busy taking care of a newborn that they didn't have time to be on her back about grades and extracurriculars.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, spreading into a broad grin as she stepped into the bright sunshine of the backyard.

This summer was looking bright.

Chapter End Notes

> Claire sure does love her new brother, it would be a shame if several months from now he was swapped out with a foul mouthed shapeshifting troll.....
>
> Side note I'm aromantic as hell, and I don't really "get" romantic attraction, so if Claire's bottled up feelings towards Jim came off as clunky, that probably has something to do with it.
>
> We see Claire taking care of (Not)Enrique a lot in the show, but I can't recall her ever complaining about being forced to care for him. And the one and only time we see her try to get out of babysitting him is when she sneaks out to go to a concert, making me think that it's the concert, and not the desire to have a free evening that she's hiding from her parents. In addition to that, the times we see Claire's parent's lecturing her, it's related to her grades/behavior, not her reluctance to help care for her infant sibling. So while Claire does help out with Enrique, like watching him for a few minutes while her parents get ready for their party; Javier and Ophelia only ever expect her to be an occasional helper and not a third parent.
>
> And the reason Claire's very strict parents are letting her have a sleepover on a school night is because they 100% think that Jim's sleepover is a bad faith offer by Barbara in a bid to isolate her child even more "Sure you can have a sleepover, but only on this school night. What's that? None of your friends can come? Guess you're just going to be alone again". So they agreed to let Claire go to a weeknight sleepover in order to outmaneuver a bid for control by (what they believe to be) a toxic parent. Right now Ophelia and Javier have a very low opinion of Barbara, but to be fair they're in the same position Claire and the other kids were a month ago. Where they have a lot of evidence pointing towards things being very wrong in the Lake house, but none of the information needed to make the correct conclusions.

Next time: Sleepover Part Two, Electric Boogaloo

Jim

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays folks! Hope you enjoy!

“Mom is the oven ready?”

“Not quite,”

“Are you su–”

“I know you don’t have much faith in my cooking abilities, but even I can tell the difference between Preheat and Off,”

Jim flushed “Sorry,” he set the bowl down on the side table and headed back to the kitchen, shooting a glance behind him to take inventory of what he had out already. Crackers, chips, dip, popcorn, oreos, chocolate covered pretzels, buffalo wings ready and waiting to be put in the oven, dead batteries and recycling for him, plus plain raw chicken wings in the fridge if he got really–

“Kiddo we have enough snacks to feed your entire school,” Barbara flashed him a soft smile, leaning against the counter across from him.

Jim felt his flush burn hotter, tearing his gaze away from the living room towards her “I just…I just want to make sure everything’s perfect,”

She stepped over to him, reaching up and cupping his cheek “I know you’re nervous, but it’s going to be fine, they aren’t coming here for

the food or the videogames, they're coming because they're your friends,"

Jim let out a shaky breath "You're…you're right,"

He didn't have to impress them or win them over, they already liked him. They wouldn't have agreed to come in the first place if they didn't.

She patted his cheek "You better believe I am mister,"

Despite that he consciously knew he didn't have to prove anything, part of Jim still itched to make sure the whole night went perfect, and he was running out of time to prepare. The others would be here any minute, Toby had stayed over once before but this was a whole new ballgame. He was hosting a sleepover with all five of them; Toby, Darci, Mary, and C– C–

His heartbeat stuttered, threatening to stop entirely.

Oh god, Claire, *the* Claire, was going to stay the night at his house. Sure it was a group thing and it's not like they'd ever be alone together and his mom was going to be there the whole time, but still–

"I– I'm going to grab some more soda from the garage," Jim quickly spun around and booked it down the hall, hoping his mom didn't notice the flush in his cheeks.

Jim didn't miss the time before the others knew his secret, when he'd been a nervous wreck for weeks on end, winding tighter and tighter and threatening to snap at any moment. But parts of that time were

simpler, like how his fear of being exposed and taken away had been so huge that it had eclipsed literally every other worry in his life.

Now that all his friends knew his biggest secret, sucking away not all but most of the fear surrounding it, all those other worries and doubts had room to wriggle their way to the surface.

Did the upstairs sink have a leak or were they just splashing around too much? Did he study enough for his history final? Did Claire know how her eyes sparkled every time she laughed?

Jim picked up the six pack from the floor of the garage and paused to take a breath before heading back into the house, trying to steady his fluttering heartbeat, the heat in his face now quickly spreading out across the rest of his skin.

They'd been hanging out together, albeit in a group, for months, and she still had no idea how he really felt. That he liked being friends with her but his feelings ran deeper than that. Feelings that he'd been trying to smother for months but refused to be silenced. Sometimes Jim got so deep in his them that he thought about meeting her alone and confessing everyth–

Metal glinted in the corner of his eye, drawing his attention to the chest freezer. The brand new metal padlock and latch, that Toby insisted on paying for himself, shone in the low light, protecting the freezer's contents from the elements and prying eyes.

The heat racing through him stopped cold, something dark and heavy taking its place in his chest.

Claire still had no idea how he felt about her, and she never would.

Being just friends with Claire was good, great even, she was an awesome friend. Jim could learn to live without being…more.

He took a deep breath and headed back into the house, doing his best to ignore the pinching in his stomach.

Jim was so *so* grateful that all the others were sticking with him; even after all the lying, even after seeing his other face. They knew everything, what he did and what he was, and they were still there for him.

That was more than Jim ever imagined he'd have, and he wasn't going to ruin it by being greedy.

His blue form was nothing even close to human, if that wasn't apparent by the way he looked it was clear in the way he ate. And all of them; Toby, Darci, Mary and Claire, were amazing enough that they didn't let that bother them, they stuck with him day or night. But just hanging around him while he was blue without running away screaming was one thing.

Asking Claire– or anyone really, for anything…romantic…that was asking too much.

After so many years Jim had almost perfect control of his nocturnal form. He didn't break things with his hulk strength, and he managed his diet without preying on the local wildlife. So aside from the fact he had to keep it secret, for the most part his monster form was manageable.

But despite his near perfect control, and the fact he was normal half

the time, Jim still turned into an inhuman beast every time the sun went down. And no matter what way you cut it, that was a big, blue elephant in the room that couldn't be ignored.

Even if he did have it under control, even if he was normal during the day, even if the others were fine hanging out with him when he was blue. There was no way any sane human being would be even halfway ok with dating a carnivorous, horned monster.

And Jim wasn't going to make Claire be the bad guy by forcing her to say so out loud.

Setting the soda on the counter, he shut his eyes and pulled in a deep breath through his nose.

Claire would never be anything more than a friend, and that was good, great, amazing. Her friendship, and the others', was more than he'd ever thought he'd have.

And Jim was so *so* thankful for it.

The doorbell rang, Jim jumping at the sound. He whirled around, gaze flickering between the front door and the stairs, the idea of running up and hiding in his room briefly flashing in his mind, then his mom stepped in front of him and gave him a knowing look.

Jim swallowed then started stepping towards the door, going through his breath cycles.

You don't have to impress them or win them over, they already like you, they wouldn't be coming if they didn't.

Fixing what he hoped was a natural looking smile on his face, Jim opened the door and came face to face with Claire, Mary, and Darci.

“Hey guys come on in!”

“Hey Jim,” Darci gave a cheery wave, raising up an aluminum pan “I brought brownies,”

“I brought guac!” Claire called out from behind her.

“And I brought my sparkling personality,” Mary added

“Awesome,” Jim stepped aside, allowing them to head inside “Go ahead and make yourselves at home, Toby should be here in a little but,”

Mary raised an eyebrow even as she tossed her duffle bag to the side and plunked herself down on the couch “He’s not here yet? But he lives right across the street?”

“He said he had to run some errands before coming here, but to not to wait for him to get started,”

“Hi girls,” Barbara made a point to turn and smile at each of them before starting to move away “I’ll be in the back room doing some work, let me know if you need anything,”

Jim gave a quick nod at his mom before she left the room, then turned to glance out the window.

How much longer would Toby be? He'd said he'd had an errand to run, but Jim honestly hadn't expected the girls to get here before him.

"We can play War Dudes while we wait for Toby," Claire knelt by the TV and started fiddling with the console "I've got the four player mode so one of us can trade off when he gets here,"

"That sounds good," Jim forced himself to turn away and headed over to take a seat with the rest of them, picking up his controller and very deliberately not looking out the window.

Where was Toby? He said he'd had an errand but he should have been here by now. Why was he so late? He hadn't answered any of his texts, what was going on?

Darci elbowed him, startling him out of his thoughts.

"You good Jim?"

"Y– yeah, I'm fine,"

Jim shook his head and forced himself to concentrate on the TV screen flashing with the game's main menu and did his best to shove his worries away. For the most part he succeeded, now that the girls were here, all of them playing games like normal, he was able to forget that he was hosting his first ever multi-person slumber party and pretend it was just a regular afternoon.

But the videogame could only distract him so much. And as Toby's absence stretched longer and longer, Jim found himself constantly glancing out the window and at his eerily silent phone. Guts twisting in on themselves further and further as the sun faded away with no trace of Toby.

Where is he?

Daylight nearly gone and intestines in a pretzel, Jim paused the game at the next cutscene "I'll be right back, I have to run upstairs to… change,"

"Ok,"

"Sounds good,"

"Take your time,"

Jim flashed a weak grin at them as he forced himself to walk, not run, up to his room.

Where was Toby? There was no way he wouldn't come right? He should have been here by now, did something happen? Was he ok?

After only a two minute wait in his room the daylight outside popped out of existence and the change swept over him, necessitating a change of clothes. Jim was in the middle of pulling on an extra large t-shirt, when he heard the front door open and Toby's voice wafting up.

He jumped at the sound, stumbling into his dresser and snagging the shirt on his horns, struggling to detangle himself without completely tearing the shirt apart.

He's here he's here he's here!

Moving frantically, Jim tugged himself free, grabbed the extra large version of his favorite jacket off the dresser, and booked it downstairs, only just remembering at the last moment to slow down.

Don't freak them out by zooming in with your super speed. Toby's here, he's fine, don't need to rush.

He still hustled down the stairs, shrugging the jacket on as the front hall came into view "Hey Tobes wha…"

Toby was down in the front hall, but that wasn't what had grabbed his attention, it was the gigantic cooler that Toby was struggling to drag through the front door.

"Here let me help you with that," Jim stepped over and grabbed the cooler handle, yanking it the rest of the way inside and allowing the front door to swing shut.

Toby looked up at him and smiled "Hey dude, sorry I'm late, it took a while to lug this thing back from the store,"

Claire poked her head out of the living room, Mary and Darci flanking her "What is all that?"

“Well to celebrate our first sleepover with all of us I wanted to get something special, so…” Toby opened the cooler with a flourish “Tah dah!”

Jim leaned over and peeked inside “Are those…”

“Shellfish?” Darci said incredulously.

“More specifically they’re oysters but yeah,” Toby hoisted a large mesh bag out of the cooler, plastic straining against the large mass of dark gray shells inside “It’s our first ever sleepover all together, so I thought I’d get us something fancy,”

“That’s very thoughtful of you Toby,” Barbara stepped in to join them in the front hall “But how do we even prepare them?”

“It’s actually not that hard, the guy at the store told me everything, first we have to wash them,”

Barbara flashed a bright smile and held out her arms “I can take care of that for you kids,”

All at once the five of them went stiff, Toby clutching the bag of oysters protectively to his chest “Well that’s nice of you Dr. Lake but uh…”

“Oh come on, I can handle washing oysters,”

Jim shifted from foot to foot, ruffling a hand through the hair at the back of his neck “Uhhh…mom, you remember the time you tried to zest those limes…”

She threw her hands up in surrender “Fine, I’ll leave it all to you guys, but get me when you eat them, I want to try one,” Barbara turned and retreated to the back room. leaving the five of them alone.

“Ok,” Toby slung the mesh sack over his shoulder and grabbed the cooler with his other hand, dragging it behind him as he headed into the kitchen “First things first, we need to wash all the crud off and sort out the dead ones,”

Jim froze, heart slamming to a stop “Hang on, are these…alive?”

“Yeah,” Mary watched over Toby’s shoulder as he tossed the bag into the sink, oblivious to Jim’s steadily rising panic “It’s the safest way to eat them, eating a dead oyster is a fast way to get food poisoning,”

His hand shot out and grabbed doorframe, wood just a hair away from creaking in protest under his fingers. Lingering just outside the kitchen while the others gathered in around the sink. He couldn’t do this, it was bad enough with all the whole animals he had to eat, but eating something while it was still–

Darci glanced back at him, neither of them said anything but she must have noticed something in his expression.

“It’s not a big deal, oysters don’t have brains, just muscle and spine. They don’t feel pain, at least not the way mammals do,” she reached in and pulled out an open shell, wrinkling her nose at it “Plus shucking them usually does them in so they’re usually dead by the time you actually eat them…but it’s fine if seafood’s not your thing,”

Her words buzzed in the back of his skull, Jim's entire body itching to run, to sprint past them out the back door and not stop until he hit the Sierra Nevadas.

Instead he stayed where he was and pulled in a deep breath, starting his breathing cycles. Thinking back on when he and Kurt talked about meat.

You should never force yourself to eat something that you think is gross, but if you feel like your disgust is coming from an irrational place, try and think about how the idea of someone else eating that food makes you feel. If you think it's ok for someone else to eat that food, then it's ok for you to eat it to.

By now the others had all turned around and were looking at him, faces showing varying levels of concern.

Toby took a step forward "You ok there Jimbo?"

Jim forced both feet flat against the floor and pulled in a deep breath through his nose.

Did the idea of these guys, or anyone else, eating live oysters fill him with disgust and revulsion?

Eating a dead oyster is a fast way to get food poisoning.

They don't feel pain, at least not the way mammals do.

No, it didn't.

That meant it was ok for him to eat them to. Now did he want to eat them?

The pride and delight on Toby's face as he held up the bag of oysters flashed in his mind.

He wanted to try.

Prying his fingers off the doorframe, Jim walked into the room at a carefully measured pace, grabbing the trashcan and moving to join the others by the sink "Yeah, I'm good, let's do this,"

They fell into a semi-comfortable rythm; setting up an assembly line sorting out the dead, smelly oysters and scrubbing the crud off the ones that were left.

Soon all the good oysters were sitting in a bowl on the counter, the five of them taking turns rinsing the grime off their hands at the sink.

Toby wrung his hands dry on the hand towel "Ok, now that they're clean we need to shuck them,"

"How…do we do that?" Claire said slowly.

The five of them simultaneously looked up and stared at each other.

Less than a minute later they were all clustered around Mary watching the tutorial she'd pulled up on her phone.

"Seems simple enough," Mary slid her phone back into her pocket "But we need some of those special knives,"

"Ooh! I've got some," Toby darted over to the cooler and pulled out a small plastic package with six little knives inside "The guy at the store helped me find them, he was super nice,"

"I'll get a bowl to put the empty shells in," Jim bent down to take another large bowl out of the cabinet "I don't want to throw them all straight in the garbage in case they cut the bag,"

"And we should get some ice to put them on," Claire added "Keep them fresh until we eat them,"

"Way ahead of you," Toby shook the plastic bag full of crushed ice he'd just grabbed from the freezer.

Jim set the oyster bowl and empty shell bowl on the table while Toby poured the ice out into an empty pan, Darci and Claire raiding the tea towels.

Once they were finished setting the towels around the table, Darci took her seat and plucked an oyster out of the bowl "Mary can you pull up the video again?"

Mary dutifully got out her phone and propped it up on the counter in

full view of the five of them “I have it on loop, so it will auto repeat once it’s done,”

“Perfect,” Claire wrapped her oyster in her tea towel “Oh wait Jim, you still need a towel to protect your hands,”

“Nah, I should be fine,” he wiggled his fingers “My skin is pretty tough like this so I didn’t need to worry about cutting myself,”

“Ok then,”

Jim grabbed an oyster and set it on the towel in front of him, he picked up his knife and then stopped, staring down at the small shellfish in front of him, the beginnings of nausea swimming in his gut.

Chances are this oyster, all the oysters in the bowl, were still alive. Shucking was the part that actually killed them.

Could he….could he *do* this?

He lifted his head just high enough to peek over to his side.

Claire and Mary were already shucking like pros, popping their oysters open with neat efficiency. Toby and Darci were a bit slower, less sure in their movements, but after some fumbling, they were able to set their own opened oysters in the ice pan with clear satisfaction on their faces.

Did seeing these guys shucking oysters

Killing them

Horrify him, disgust him, fill him with revulsion?

No it didn't. Oysters were just food. People ate meat and seafood all the time, there was nothing wrong with that.

If it's ok for someone else to eat that food, then it's ok for you to eat it to.

This was fine, oysters were just food, for everyone. He wasn't ripping a bunny rabbit apart with his fangs, he was just preparing food, the exact same way people across the planet did.

Was this something he wanted to do?

Darci yelped as the oyster slipped from her grip, shooting across the table and splattering brine everywhere, Toby and and Claire laughing while Mary squawked in disgust.

Jim's stomach rolled again but not from disgust.

Hanging out with his friends, making snacks and joking around and having a good time together.

Or spending another long night locked up in his house all alone.

Yes, he did.

Jim took a deep breath and slid the knife in between the shells.

The first oyster he had to pay very close attention to, willing his fingers to stay steady and not tremble as he wriggled the knife inside and popped the shell open. The second was much of the same, but after number three he started to get the hang of it, able to feel out the best place to slide the knife in pop the shell. Able to shuck with the same efficiency of dicing vegetables, motions becoming automatic enough that he barely had to think about it.

“Don’t worry Mary, I’m sure oyster juice washes right out,” he flashed her a fanged grin, tossing an empty shell into the bowl with a flourish.

“Forget about stains, what about the smell?!”

“Swing by my house later,” Toby piped up “You’ll be Meow Meow PI’s new best friend,”

They all laughed at that, even Mary’s pout couldn’t fully hide the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

The time flew by, the five of them trading jibes and elbowing each other as they worked, and before he knew it the oyster bowl was empty, the ice filled pan was packed with oysters glistening in their brine, and the shell bowl was practically overflowing.

“Alright the oysters are all ready,” Jim picked up the pan, along with

another empty bowl for shells, and carried them into the living room "Toby you got the–"

"Yep," Toby's arm stuck out and waved a bottle at him from behind where the open door of the fridge was concealing him "I got lemon juice and red wine vinegar, any of you guys want tabasco sauce?"

"Ooh I'll have some!" Claire waved at him.

He stepped out from behind the door, two more bottles clutched to his chest, taking several steps towards the living room before pausing and turning back "Hey Dr. L, we're getting into the oysters!"

"I'll be out in a minute," her voice echoed from the back room "Go ahead and start without me,"

Soon they were all settled in their seats on the couch, oyster pan and shell bowl in front of them and small plates in their laps. Darci reached over first, plucking an oyster out of the pan and tipping it back into her mouth, when her head rose back up there was a blissful look spreading across her face "Oh man these are good!"

Claire gulped down her own oyster as well "Yeah, you got some really nice ones TP,"

"I try,"

Curiosity growing, Jim reached out and plucked up an oyster as daintily as he could, raising it up and giving it a sniff. He'd been blindsided by Toby bringing the oysters in the first place, followed immediately anxious about the idea of them being 'alive', so the idea

of actually eating them himself hadn't occurred to him until now.

Sure he couldn't really eat 'normal' food while he was like this, but raw meat was usually fine, so maybe the oysters would be ok…

He hesitated, remembering exactly just how fresh they were. Jim pulled in a deep breath and peeked over at the girls sprinkling their own oysters with various condiments before slurping them down.

Eating them raw is a safety thing, they don't have brains or feel pain the way we understand it.

Jim willed his breathing to slow.

Did the sight of the others eating potentially live oysters fill him with revulsion?

No. It didn't.

It wasn't wrong for other people to eat oysters.

That meant it was ok for him to eat oysters to.

Taking one more deep breath, Jim raised the shell to his mouth and tipped it back.

He froze, shell poised right outside his lips.

That was… *really* good.

Jim tossed the empty shell into the bowl, grabbed another oyster and slurped it right down, then another, then an–

“Hey save some for the rest of us,” Mary playfully swatted his hand away.

“Sorry, it’s just– these are *amazing* !”

Darci smirked at him from across the couch “This your first time trying oysters?”

“Yes– well no, I mean I tried them once in pasta sauce, but that was during the day, having them raw, at night they’re like– wow,”

“That…that’s awesome,” Toby smiled sheepishly at him from across the coffee table “I was hoping that you’d be able to enjoy them while…you know,”

Jim blinked at him, hand frozen reaching halfway towards the oyster tray. Had Toby gotten the oysters specifically so he could eat them to, so that they could have a food that they could all eat together?

His chest clenched with a surge of unexpected emotion, blinking away the sudden wetness in his eyes “Thanks Tobes,”

Claire nudged Toby with her elbow “Aren’t you going to try one? You bought them after all,”

Toby’s face fell “I’m…getting to it,”

Darci leaned back in her seat “Well go ahead, we don’t want to eat them all before you can try one,”

“….thanks….”

The rest of them sat back and watched as Toby reached out and gingerly picked up an oyster. He stared at it for a moment, looking at it like it was about to leap up and attack him, then quickly gulped it down, expression curdling as he did “Oh man, that tastes like the ocean and *not* in a good way,”

“Sorry, more for us,” Claire reached across him and snagged another oyster.

Jim reached for another oyster himself, he was about to tip it in his mouth then hesitated. The oysters were good by themselves, but what if….

He popped the whole shell into his mouth, oyster and all, smooth flavor melting across his mouth as the shell crunched against his teeth, blending with the brine.

“These are *really* good,”

Mary looked up at him curiously “What do they taste like, with the shells and everything?”

“Like, chocolate, well not really exactly, but it’s the closest thing, just like smooth and rich and really *really* good,”

Toby beamed “Glad you’re enjoying them,”

“Enjoying your oysters kids?” his mom stepped into the room

“Yep,”

“Uh huh,”

“You know it,”

“Having the time of our lives,”

She grinned “Great, mind if I try one?”

“Here you go,” Toby set one oyster on a small plate and held it out to her, Barbara took it and lifted the shell to tip it back into her mouth, making a face not unlike the one Toby had made as her head came back up.

“You…you kids enjoy these,”

Jim, Mary, Claire, and Darci all laughed while Toby patted her arm sympathetically. Between the four of them they finished off the rest of the oysters pretty quickly, Jim setting the shell bowl off to the side for later snacking. He moved to pick up the ice pan but Barbara beat him to it.

“I’ll take care of the dishes, you kids focus on having fun,”

"But mom–"

“No buts mister, I’ll handle all the dishes, I can’t do a worse job than I did with the limes,”

Jim gave a soft chuckle at that but sat back and allowed her to carry the pan and the rest of the dishes back into the kitchen.

Turning back he saw Darci getting out a deck of cards “So I was thinking we play some poker,” her smile turned deadly “With our standard stakes,”

“Standard stakes?” Toby wheezed out.

Claire giggled and swatted his shoulder “That just means the loser of each hand gets make-up put on them,” she froze “Unless…not everyone would be ok with that…”

The way she, Darci, and Mary, even Toby, all avoided looking at Jim when she said that meant that her words could only be meant for him.

Jim had to stop and think for a second. Was he ok with getting makeup put on him…like this? While it wasn't something he'd ever normally wear, Jim wasn't bothered by the idea of wearing makeup, heck he'd even borrowed some of his mom's concealer on days when he had a really bad zit. Plus it wasn't like he was being singled out or anything, chances are everyone would end up wearing some.

Doing makeover poker wasn't an idea that would have ever occurred to him in a million years, but he didn't find the thought particularly distressing either.

"Yep that sounds good, although I don't know how to play poker, so if you guys are ok with going slow I'm game,"

Everyone in the room visibly relaxed at that.

"I'll show you the ropes Jim," Toby patted his shoulder "I'm kind of a card game master, every Friday night when Nana was playing bingo, I was learning the way of the cards from Mr. Beadleman,"

Claire raised an eyebrow "That kind of sounds like he was teaching you Yu Gi Oh,"

"To be fair he just taught me stage magic and a bunch of card games, but I once showed him Yu Gi Oh and he kind of went wild with it, I actually think I might have created a monster there,"

Darci tapped the deck loudly against the coffee table "Alright if you're new to poker the first thing we do is…"

The five of them knelt at the coffee table while Darci dealt out the

cards and explained the rules, only interrupted by the occasional clank of bowls and hiss of water coming from the kitchen as Barbara took care of the dishes. Halfway through Darci's explanation Mary got out a large bag and started passing out its contents one by one. Clusters of brightly colored tubes and compacts slowly building in front of each of them.

"Remember the rules; lipstick, eyeshadow, hair chalk, nail polish, and blush. You lose a round you put one on, set whatever you used behind you and when you run out grab some more from someone else. We keep going until we have literally no more places we can put makeup on,"

Toby picked up two of his cards and glanced at Jim "You good to go ahead or do you want to go over the rules again?"

"I think I'm good," Jim picked up his own two cards, he was still a little fuzzy on the rules, but he should be able to pick it up as they went along.

As they settled into the game, setting out cards and exchanging them for the ones in their hands, he was able to keep up fairly well. And despite his noob status, he wasn't the first one to lose a hand, Claire was.

She grabbed a small tube from her pile and set it down in front of her "I choose lipstick,"

Darci and Mary shared a look, cheeks puffing as they struggled to hold back their laughter.

"Given by force or self-inflicted?" Darci asked, voice shaking with barely restrained giggles.

“I’ll do it myself,”

Mary smirked at her, before tossing a sandwich bag full of q- tips her way. Claire caught it, shooting Mary a grumpy look. She popped the cap off the tube and dabbed at the lipstick inside with one of the q tips. Once it was thoroughly coated with blue rouge she closed the tube and picked up a small compact. Flicking it open and using the mirror inside to keep an eye on her reflection while meticulously painting her upper lip blue.

Examining her reflection one more time, Claire snapped the compact shut and tossed the bag back at Mary, blue lip now curled into a self assured smile “Laugh while you can girls, soon it’ll be your turns,”

Mary shot a feral grin right back at her “Oh we’ll see about that,”

But it wasn’t any of the girls who lost the next round, or Toby, it was Jim. No one said anything, the jovial mood gone in an instant, tense looks flashing back and forth between the four of them.

Swallowing back the sudden tightness in his throat, Jim slowly reached out and set a small square compact down in front of him “I pick eyeshadow…and I’m going to to need help putting it on,”

The tension eased but not by much, the gap in their conversation stretching longer and longer until Mary stood up.

“I’ll do it,” she hesitantly stepped towards him, grabbing the compact and another q tip “Alright, lean back and close your eyes,”

Jim complied, tilting his head back and willing himself not to twitch away at the gentle dabbing on his eyelid.

Then just as quickly as it started it stopped.

“Ok you’re done,”

Jim sat up blinking, vision focusing to see Mary holding out the compact mirror towards him. He gently accepted it, peering into the tiny mirror to examine his reflection. His face was nearly identical to the way it normally looked, the only difference was that one of his eyes was now shaded in violet from above.

“Dang,” he looked up and grinned at them “This is a good look for me,”

They all laughed, more from relief than anything else.

The game continued, an easy mood settling over the room, the five of them falling into comfortable banter as they lost themselves in the game. Darci, Mary, Claire and Toby munching on the various snacks he’d set out while Jim crunched his way through the oyster shells. The only disruption his mom coming in to rotate out empty snack bowls with fresh buffalo wings, flat out refusing any of their offers to help. Time was flying by so fast the next time Jim glanced at the clock he was amazed to see nearly an hour and a half had gone by, all of them now sporting various shades of jewel and neon colors.

“Sorry Jimbo, looks like you're the loser this round,”

Jim shrugged and set another compact down in front of him “Hair

chalk,”

Darci smirked at him, eyes shaded in orange and pink “You know sooner or later you’re going to have to use your lipstick,”

“Never,”

Toby sided up to him, green and black lips pulled into a wide grin “Jealous?”

Jim just rolled his eyes, Darci already moving behind him with the hair chalk “You caught me, I don’t want to do lipstick because I know I’ll never pull it off as well as you,”

“Well enjoy it while you can,” Mary tapped her cards loudly against the table “You’ll get it eventually,”

He ignored them and leaned back, holding still while Darci separated out a section of his hair and–

A thumping sound echoed from the front door, all of them simultaneously snapping upright, the hairchalk falling to the carpet, jerking their heads towards the source of the sound. For a moment things were silent, Jim was just starting to wonder if they’d imagined the sound when the knob started rattling.

Someone on the other side trying to open the door.

Jim couldn’t move, pinned in place with shock and horror, frozen

kneeling on the floor staring at the jiggling knob.

This couldn't be happening, this couldn't be real, there couldn't be someone standing outside trying to get in while he was– this. His legs went tense even as they were folded underneath him, ready to leap up and flee towards safety wherever that might be–

"Barb?" a voice, a man's voice, called from outside the house "I know you're in there Barb open the door,"

His heart leapt up into his throat, ice shooting through his veins, glacial chill settling over his entire body.

The only person who ever called his mom Barb was–

Fingers tightly gripped his shoulder from behind "It's ok, I changed the locks and got rid of the spare key, he can't get in,"

Jim didn't so much as twitch under her grip, eyes locked on the door, fingers curled in a stony deathgrip around his cards.

"C'mon Barbara you can't keep blocking me out forever, you need to hear me out,"

The entire room was dead quiet, everyone watching with held breath as the knob continued to rattle.

The knob jiggled for a few more seconds before going still. But no one relaxed so much as an inch, all eyes still locked on the door. The room

filling with heavy, loaded silence worse than any amount of noise.

Toby slowly set his cards facedown on the table without his eyes ever once leaving the door, but no one moved to pick up their game. Jim's front bumped against the table, he hadn't even realized he was tilting forward until now, eyes and ears trained on the front of the house. There was no more knocking and the knob wasn't moving any more, but he hadn't heard anyone walking away, and there was some kind of new sound….

Jim leaned forward even more, hanging halfway over the coffee table, heartbeat booming in his ears, but not so loud he couldn't hear it. Some kind of faint scratching coming from the other side of the door, he'd never heard anything like that before, what could tha–

The lock popped open.

Lightning cracked through him, heart plummeting down into the pit of his gut, cards tumbling through his fingers and fluttering down to the floor, a roaring in his ears as the door creaked open–

He was vaguely aware of the hand on his shoulder yanking him to his feet.

"Basement now, *go go go!* "

Other hands were on his arms and back, tugging him out of the room, urging forward him with harsh whispers and urgent tugs. Jim only barely managed to stumble himself along, guided by the desperate pulling on his arms and shoulders, everything except the roaring thunder in his ears seemed faint and far away.

The loud sound of a door slamming brought him back to the here and now. Starting a little bit, Jim found himself standing on the top basement stair, the door firmly shut in front of him, raised voices echoing out from behind it.

"I don't know what you think you're doing but you have ten seconds to get out before I call the police!"

"No Barb, you won't return my calls, you won't agree to meet up, you forced my hand here, and I'm not going anywhere until we talk this out!"

Jim just stood there, unable to tear his gaze away from the door as his parents–

His parents, both of them, together.

Continued to scream at each other, too shellshocked to even consider moving, when suddenly there was a hand on his forearm. Snapping around, he saw Toby reaching up towards him from a lower step, the girls all huddled behind him, all wearing matching strained expressions.

"It's ok, Dr. Lake can handle him, we'll just hunker down here until she kicks his ass out," Toby gave his arm a squeeze "We'll be out of here in no time,"

The girls nodded along and murmured reassurances.

All Jim could do was stare at them. His dad had broken into their house and Barbara was dealing with him all alone, and they were

more concerned with how Jim felt when his mom was the one in *real* danger here!?

His dad had already gone so far as to break in, what was stopping him from going even farther?

What if he got angry enough that he attacked his mom?

Toby's fingers tightened around his stony flesh, another hand going up to gently pat his upper arm "I promise you won't have to stay in the basement for long,"

Jim's jaw fell open, gaze flitting across the four of them. His mom was in actual, literal danger here and these guys were more worried about how he felt about being in the–

Oh.

Oh.

Jim blinked at them a few times before slowly turning back towards the door.

They thought that being down…here would be hard for him. And it was, a little, but the memories he had of being locked in the basement, while bad, were so few and so long ago it had been a long time since he'd struggled with them.

It didn't feel great when he thought back on them, or when they just

happened to hit him as he was retrieving something from down here.

Not that the basement was somewhere he ever went without having an explicit reason to do so.

But for the most part he was over it.

More than anything he was terrified about the very alive and real threat behind the wooden door less than twenty feet away in the living room.

“Ten years, ten years of no contact and you just expect to waltz back in here, with no knowledge of anything we’ve been through all this time and act like nothing’s changed!?”

Jim reached out and ran a four fingered hand over the wood in front of him. A fresh coat of paint covered the marks, but they were still there, his fingers tracing over the grooves.

“How can I fix anything if you won’t give me a chance to apologize!”

The memories of those nights from back when he was a little kid were murky and indistinct, but he couldn’t forget them if he tried.

Lights being too bright, sounds being too loud. The helpless rage building up more than his tiny body could hold.

Screaming and screaming until his voice was hoarse, clawing at this same door and running up and down the stairs to try to rid of some of

this burning white hot energy.

Desperate to be free from his prison.

“What on earth makes you think you *deserve* forgiveness!?”

His fingers curled into a shaking fist, balled against the door.

He’d felt so angry and trapped as a little kid, but that was before he realized his real prison was something far worse than four walls and a wooden door.

No matter where he went Jim carried it with him.

Hiding in his house every night for years, terrified of what would happen if he strayed outside his sanctuary.

Four months ago, when the girls had confronted him and sent everything spiraling, that fear had surged like never before. Blazing to an impossibly high peak as everything escalated further and further, his whole life falling apart all around him while Jim desperately tried to hold it together. Wrapping himself tighter and tighter in secrecy, pulling away from everyone.

It had nearly strangled him, cutting out everyone he cared about and hiding himself away, but he was too terrified to do anything else. Clinging to his isolation even as it was breaking him.

But despite his best efforts to push everyone out, pulling his solitude

around him like a shield, that hadn't stopped them.

Toby, Claire, Mary, and Darci had forced their way in and ripped down the walls he'd spent over a decade building.

Now the loneliness that had been his security and his prison was gone, leaving him adrift in uncharted waters.

But despite all the uncertainty, fumbling through the unknown, everything he knew turned on its head; his life was the best that it had been since before he'd taken that bath.

Now here he was again, hiding himself away like a terrified little kid.

"I'm only human ok! I made *one* goddamn mistake, you shouldn't hold it against me forever!"

A new emotion flickered to life in Jim's chest, but not worry, something hotter.

Things had changed, he wasn't a little kid anymore. Too small and powerless to be anything but be a burden.

He'd been afraid for so long, isolated, locked away, terrified of anyone getting so much as a glimmer of truth, now he was just *done* .

The burning spread out from his chest, heat snaking out through his limb swallowing every trace of the terrified chill leaving only smoldering in its place. A low rumbling coming from deep in the pit of

his gut.

Jim was done hiding, locked away like a terrified little kid.

It was time to face his problems head on.

He grabbed the knob and wrenched the door open. Slamming against the wall with a bang as Jim stomped through it into the kitchen.

A chorus of soft gasps rose up from behind him “Jim what are you–”

In some part of his brain Jim knew this was dumb, charging in like this without any kind of a plan, but he’d spent so much time hiding, locked up in his house and his own head, he was just *done* .

And this was *long* overdue.

He stalked towards the living room, ignoring the hissed whispers of protest behind him turning to shouts. Rounding the corner and coming face to face with *him* for the first time in over a decade.

Jim narrowed his eyes, lip curling and the beginnings of a growl rumbling out of his chest. Even after ten years he recognized him immediately, that same face had once smiled down at him while ruffling his hair, he could still recall exactly how the stubble of that beard tickled his cheek when he hugged him.

But while those memories still had an echo of nostalgia, when Jim looked at the man in front of him he felt no fondness, no hurt, just

burning contempt.

“Seriously Barb, what’s it going to take for you to–”

As soon as Jim stepped into the room James’ eyes flickered past Barbara and landed on him, face instantly draining of color, staggering backwards.

For the first time Jim didn’t try to stifle the growl he felt building up.

This was someone who should have been there for him and mom, who should have supported them during those awful early years, and for every year after that.

But instead he’d selfishly skipped town without so much as a goodbye, leaving them floundering in the wake his absence left, nearly drowning in the struggle to keep his ‘condition’ under control.

There was no way his dad could have known about the bathbomb, or what had happened to him, and him staying wouldn’t have changed it. But if he hadn’t ditched them when he did they wouldn’t have suffered nearly as much.

“Hey *dad* ,” Jim leaned hard into the raspy edge of his night time voice “Long time no see,”

Barbara whipped around at the sound of his voice, eyes going wide behind her glasses and hands flying to cover her mouth. From behind him Jim could hear the others scurrying into the room after him.

He felt a twinge of guilt at blindsiding his mom like this, but she'd been fighting this battle on her own for years, it was time for Jim to tag in.

"Surprised?" Jim gestured to himself, stepping past Barbara towards James "Guess I have grown up a bit,"

"Wha– buh–" his dad stammered "h– how–"

"How? Well after you left I had a little accident in the bath, and now I shop in the big and tall section,"

A snarl ripped out of him, exposing sharp teeth "You'd know that if you'd stayed, or even bothered to call,"

His dad's jaw was working open and shut, no words coming out, skin chalky, backing up further until he fell on the couch. Seeing him sitting there, like he *belonged* here, Jim's anger deepened into a bloody rage.

"Get this through your head," Jim growled "Because I'm only going to say this once,"

He stalked forward, James recoiling back into the couch as Jim closed in.

"A month after you left everything went to hell. We were living some of the worst years of our lives while you were dicking around in Vermont,"

He stopped two feet away, towing over the gibbering figure of his dad.

“But hey, guess what, we survived. Somehow despite having to deal with *this* ,” Jim waved a hand in front of his face “We pulled through, without *you* . And you think you can waltz right back in now that it’s convenient for *you* –”

Some deep, murky part of his brain trilled with satisfaction at seeing his dad flinch.

“We don’t care what you want. We don’t care if you’re sorry or not,” Jim loomed over him, words punctuated with harsh snarls and barks, echoes of a roar itching to be let out “We don’t need you here, we don’t *want* you here. So. Get. *Lost* .”

The room went dead silent. Jim stayed where he was glaring down at James, the others lingering behind him with held breaths. Crumpling under the pressure James collapsed in on himself, folding over burying his face in his hands, emitting a weak snuffling sound.

Jim just glared down at the man in front of him without a trace of sympathy. This guy had walked out on his family and came crawling back ten years later and *he* was the one crying? If he thought that playing the sympathy card was going to get him anywhere then he was seriously–

Wait.

This…didn’t sound like crying.

His train of thought slowly ground to a halt, growl dying off and jaw

dropping open as he stared down at the man on the couch, not believing his ears.

His dad wasn't crying, he was *laughing.*

James sat up, hands falling away from his mouth and hearty laughter spilling out into the silent room, a wide grin stretched across his face "Sonuvabitch," he slapped the side of his knee "That old potion actually worked after all,"

Barbara

Chapter Notes

Content warning: misogynistic language

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barbara just stood there, frozen to the floor, staring at James in stunned silence while he sat there on the couch, laughing, his words bouncing around in her skull.

That old potion actually worked after all.

It was bad enough that James had actually broken in, then Jim had rushed in and he'd *seen* him–

Something was *deeply* wrong, when he saw Jim he should have screamed, ran, passed out from shock, not…not…

Pieces were flying together in her mind, she could already see the rough shape they were taking, but the picture forming was so terrible that her brain refused to acknowledge it.

"James…." she said slowly "What are you talking about?"

His laughter stopped, James turning towards her and flashing a vicious grin "Why don't you go check under the fridge?"

"The fridge? Wha–"

“You just might find something interesting,” he added, a sinister lilt to his voice.

Blood rushing in her ears, Barbara turned towards the kitchen–

Jim was already moving, hustling into the other room with the other kids trailing on his heels. Making straight for the fridge, Jim slid down to his knees and grabbed the bottom of the fridge in one fluid motion, tilting it up with a loud creak. All five of them gathering in close and peeking at the small space underneath, A frown curled to life on Jim’s face, reaching far underneath the fridge and pulling something out, it looked long and flat, almost like a sheet of paper, but it was the wrong color, and paper wasn’t that thi–

The fridge crashed to the ground, causing everyone else to jump. Jim didn’t react to the sound in the slightest, gaze locked on the object in his hands. Staring at it with wide eyes, mouth falling open. The other kids huddled around him, twisting and craning their necks to get a view of the object, shock rippling through each of them in a tangible wave as they saw it. Mary dropped down to her knees, Toby’s face went chalky and gaunt, Claire covered her mouth eyes going large, and Darci let out a short gasp before choking off, expression frozen in horror.

Her heartbeat boomed even louder. Barbara felt herself start to tremble, she tried to see what the kids were looking at but couldn’t because of the angle. Faintly, as if from a great distance, she heard James start to chuckle again.

“Jim…” she had to fight to keep the quiver out of her voice “What is that?”

The only response was dead silence, Jim and the kids either too stunned or too horrified to answer.

Intestines in knots, Barbara picked up her frozen feet and forced herself to move towards the kitchen. As she got closer Barbara was able to get a better look at the mysterious object in Jim's hands. It looked almost like a wide piece of…leather; but why would just a piece of leather cause such a reaction?

"What is it?" Barbara finally lost the battle to keep her voice from shaking "What are you looking at?"

Slowly, Jim lifted the leather up and handed it to her, fingers trembling as they uncurled from the cured hide, his eyes didn't move the entire time, gaze now locked on the floor.

A rolling in her gut and a chill in her pounding heart, Barbara grasped both sides of the leather and stretched it out in fro–

The earth slammed to a stop, raw emotion, too wild to even try and identify, cracking through her like lightning, nearly knocking her off her feet. She staggered back, a roaring in her skull and her heart in her throat, the rest of the world falling away until the only thing that was left was the leather clutched tightly in her fingers.

The leather was dusty and brittle with cracked edges, a sign of its poor aging. And while the back was blank, the opposite side that Jim had been looking at until a moment ago, that Barbara was now staring at with a mounting sense of horror, had been marked with black ink. A lot of the smaller pieces of ink along the damaged edges, what looked like it could have once been writing, had been worn and faded beyond recognition. But towards the center, where the leather was less damaged and still had some flexibility; large, hieroglyphic-like pictures stood out stark and clear.

On the far left was a human shaped figure holding a black jar and standing in front of a pond. The picture to the immediate right was almost identical, but in this one the jar was blank and the pond was pitch black. The next picture showed the human figure standing halfway in the pond, the next one just the black pond.

But it was the final picture that struck her like a dagger to the gut.

A figure emerging from the pond, one foot in the black water and the other on dry land, but not the same figure that had entered it. This figure was larger, broader, and had a massive set of horns curling up from its head.

She couldn't get enough air, chest heaving and vision swimming as her back hit the counter. Her arms fell limply to her sides, leather slipping from her fingers, snatched away by Claire before it could hit the floor. Barbara's head was spinning, chest heaving, the lights of the kitchen burning painfully bright in her vision, the cold, sharp edge of the counter digging into her back and hands. It was James' laughter, trickling in from the next room, that snapped her back to reality.

"You….you did this…" she whispered.

"Oh man! All these years it was a dud, but it turns out you were dealing with this each night," he let out a guffaw.

"Buh buh–" Barbara stumbled back into the living room, one hand on the wall to keep her upright "How did you even– James, what *is* this!?" she pointed a shaking finger towards the leather in Claire's hands.

"Oh that, that was just the label, it came wrapped around the jar with the potion in it,"

“ P– potion!? What potion!? Where does something like this even come from!?”

James just shrugged again, leaving Barbara standing there with her jaw working open and shut.

How could he be so damn casual about this, doesn’t he realize what he did to his so –

“Hell if I know, my great grandma’s great grandma brought it over with her from Wales. Before that your guess is as good as mine,”

“James....” her voice was low and soft, her mind refusing to acknowledge what her bones already knew “What did you do?”

He got to his feet, thumbs in his pockets and a smug grin on his face, self satisfaction practically oozing out of his pores. Seeing that expression on James in this situation felt painfully out of place, that look belonged to long ago nights when he’d successfully talked his way into getting upgrades to VIP seats at a club, or managed to sneak them into the front row of a concert.

Not here, not with *this.*

“Well the night before I left I mixed great grandma’s potion with some baking soda and left it with your bath fizzers,”

He looked her square in the eye, something nasty curling behind the edges of his grin “A little going away present,”

“Buh– but, why!?”

“Oh stop with the act Barb you know why. I was just paying back for everything you put me through. You were the one always trying to drag me down, nagging me day and night, making me do chores and babysit all the time–”

He’s your son, how is it babysitting when he’s your own child.

That wasn’t even remotely the point of this conversation, not even close, but her brain clung to the insignificant details to keep from focusing on the larger, looming horror.

“So I figured on my way out why not teach you a lesson you’d never forget,”

“But how did– how did you know Jim was going to use it!?”

“Honestly I figured you would,”

Her heart stopped, blood running cold and a jagged lump of ice dropping in the pit of her gut.

Well the night before I left I mixed great grandma’s potion with some baking soda and left it with your bath fizzers,

Honestly I figured you would,

This was meant for her, it was *always* meant to be her.

"...what?"

She pivoted at the sound of Jim's voice, him and the other kids slowly stepping back into the room.

James glanced at him and gave a half-hearted shrug "Sorry kid, tough luck I guess,"

Barbara still couldn't move, arms and legs frozen in shock, but beneath the surface something smoldered to life deep inside her.

"Wh– why James, why!? Wasn't it enough to abandon us!? Why– why *this* !?"

He turned back towards her, mirth abruptly dropping off his face, his expression cold and stony "Oh get off your goddamn high horse Barb, you were the one who drove me away,"

"What are you–"

"Cut the innocent act," he said with a sneer "You were the one always henpecking me into the ground, nothing I ever did was good enough for you. You should have figured out that one day I wasn't going to take it any more," he glanced over to where Jim and his friends were gathering in the entryway "Sorry kid but your mom's a nagging bitch,"

Barbara struggled to form cohesive words, the ice in her chest at war with the growing heat in her belly “But how does that justify– this!?”

James grinned again, and while the expression was somewhat familiar, her having seen different versions of it in the past, but now there was something dark behind it that chilled her to her core.

“I wanted to make the outside match the inside, turn you into an ugly freak, get you run out of town with torches and pitchforks and all that,” he let out another loud bark of laughter “But to hear that you’ve been bending over backwards cleaning up after little Jimmy’s messes for all these years, oh man that’s even better,”

Blood rushed in her ears, but not loud enough to drown out James’ laughter, arms numb at her sides but chest ablaze.

It was never some far off witch, all the books and documentaries were right, the Salem witch trials weren’t magic, just mob mentality and moral panic. It was James, it was James all along.

She’d thought that James was done hurting them, had been determined to make that true. But James was the one who’d *been* hurting them for years, all this time. Who’d left a poison pill that she’d handed to their child.

Watching him doubling over in laughter, at the thought of her, of Jim’s– of his *son’s* suffering, the twin currents of emotion inside her rose to a fever pitch, sharpening everything around her into painful clarity.

There was a time that she imagined sharing her life with James,

growing old together, possibly having more children.

But when this man saw all the harm he'd caused, all the pain he put them through, and his first response was to laugh–

Something inside her snapped.

"Get out,"

James started a bit "What?"

"I said. Get. Out."

"Oh no Barb, I'm not done here just y–"

Her body moved without thinking. Striding forward and grabbing James by the scruff of his jacket in one fluid move, yanking hard and dragging him towards the front door.

"Ow, geez Barb, take it eas–"

She ripped the door open and threw him outside with a strength she didn't know she possessed. James stumbled across the stoop, staggering towards the front steps but stopping himself before he could fall.

The bottom of her foot on the seat of his pants helped with that.

James flew forward, splattering face first on the pavement with a cry and wet crunch. Groaning and rolling around on the ground, he flopped over to face her again, twin streams of red pouring out of his unnaturally bent nose.

“Don’t you ever *ever* show your face at the house again!”

James flinched, crab walking backwards on the asphalt, every trace of smugness gone now.

“If I ever see you here again I will kill you, do you hear me?!” her voice barely sounded like her own, too much of the white hot fire in her chest roaring out with it “If you ever try to set foot in this house again so help me god *I will slit your throat and throw your body in the woods!* ”

Barbara was able to catch a glimpse of James scrambling to his feet and starting to run towards the main road right before she spun on her heel, stomped back inside, and slammed the door shut behind her with enough force to rattle the pictures on the walls.

For a moment she didn’t move, standing there facing the shut door, breath coming in heavy, quivering pants. Two shaking hands, her own hands, rose and pressed against the wood, bracing herself. Trembling, she leaned forward to rest her forehead against the wood, heart pounding, blood rushing in her ears.

It was never some witch from Salem, it was James, all along it was James that had brought all this suffering to their door.

From behind she heard Toby let out an awkward chuckle “That was

uh…that was pretty badass Dr. L,”

The words only just whispered in past the roaring in her skull, the echo of James’ laughter still ringing in her ears.

How could she have been so wrong? Spend ten years– ten *goddamn* years, digging into a red herring? Sara Good of the estate sale had never been related to the Salem witch trials, the bathbomb hadn’t even come from her in the first place. She’d gone so far as to plan to drag her child to the other side of the country for a giant coincide–

A vice tightened around her heart, the agony nearly crippling her.

It was supposed to be her, this was meant for her all along.

James had done this to target her but Jim was the one who got hurt instead.

Who had his entire life ripped away from him before it had even begun.

Her knees buckled, upper body dragging against the door as she slid down to the floor.

How could she have misread James so badly? James– a man she’d once trusted everything to, was so rotten that he’d left a poison pill behind when he’d gone, right under Barbara’s nose.

And she’d handed it to Jim none the wiser.

How could she have been so blind, so *stupid* – She should have seen James for what he really was a long time ago. Cut him from their lives before he had the chance to do any permanent damage, actually *noticed* that something was horribly wrong with that goddamn bathbomb before she handed it to her five year old son.

A sob bubbled up out of her mouth.

Ten years, ten years spent on a wild goose chase. So much time, effort, and money wasted on looking into a fairy tale when she should have paid more attention to the monster she'd invited in herself.

From behind the floorboards gave a soft creak "Mom?" Jim spoke up hesitantly.

She barely heard him over the roar of the raging storm inside her.

Barbara had promised herself that Jim would never have to fear adults in his own house the way she had, that his home would always be a safe place for him. But she had brought this poison home and exposed her baby to it.

A strangled wail broke free from her throat, more sobs gushing out after it as she completely collapsed on the ground.

She'd failed, she'd failed herself as a person and she'd failed as a mother in the worst ways possible.

Fingers rose and tangled through her hair, pulling and tugging until

she felt the burning sting in her scalp.

As if her own shortcomings could be pulled away so easily. As if she could even atone for over a decade of negligence

Through the tears and askew glasses Barbara caught a glimpse of a large, blue blurry figure kneeling down next to her and leaning towards her with its arms outstretched.

The sight was like a red hot arrow through the black fog of grief.

Now instead of playing with his friends your son is going to spend his whole night comforting you, a nasty voice inside her head whispered *he already lost his childhood because of you now you're taking his adolescence.*

You're not a parent you're a parasite, sucking away everything your son has until there's nothing left.

Just like your own mother.

Preternatural strength surged through her, popping upright and somehow managing to bodily shove Jim away.

Jim flopped back onto his backside, managing to prop himself up with his hands, Barbara crumpling back down, still sobbing.

The cool wood of the floor pressed against her cheek, hushed whispers and urgent voices washing over her, only gleaning bits and pieces as

the guilt slammed into her again and again.

"--need some help here,"

"But who are we supposed to–"

"--can't just leave her like this!"

In the one tiny corner of her mind clinging to rationality Barbara knew just how bad this was, and how she was actively making it worse, that she shouldn't be going to pieces in front of her child and four other children. She was a grown woman and she needed to get herself together and start acting like it.

But a dam inside her had burst and she just couldn't stop, even as a wave of hot shame rushed in alongside the guilt, leaving her a weeping, trembling mess.

Barbara had no idea how long she stayed like that, lying in a quivering puddle of tears on the floor, the shame and the misery pounding into her again and again with every beat of her heart.

I failed, I failed as a parent, I failed Jim every single step of the way.

From out of nowhere something tugged on Barbara's shoulder, pulling her upright. Lifting her head, Barbara saw a blurry, tear washed version of what was still undoubtedly Nancy Domzalski's face.

Nancy's mouth was moving but Barbara didn't register any sound,

more hands were on her back and shoulders now, pulling her to her feet. Somehow Barbara found her legs underneath her, still helplessly sobbing as Nancy, and who she now recognized was Toby, led her out the front door.

Her crying didn't abate, even as she stumbled through the dark cul de sac, Nancy and Toby gently guiding her across the street to the Domzalski house. Bringing her inside and guiding her towards the couch, where Barbara promptly collapsed. Snuffling back tears, she caught a glimpse of Toby and Nancy standing in the door, words exchanged between the two of them. Toby leaned over and gave her one final, lingering glance, then stepped out and shut the door behind him. Leaving her and Nancy alone in the house.

Nancy bodily turned and gave Barbara a long look, and then stepped out of the room.

Now it was just Barbara, alone, crying her eyes out on the neighbor's couch at nine o'clock at night.

That realization alone was enough to make her sob even harder, by this point Barbara had given up any hope of stopping the flood of tears, but she did her best to gulp back her sobs and try to regain her bearings somewhat. And a few minutes later, when Nancy came back into the room holding two travel mugs and a box of tissues under her arm, Barbara had pulled herself together enough to move somewhat and form semi-coherent words past the tears.

"I– I– I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she shakily tried to get to her feet, trying to wipe away the layers of tears and mucus with the back of her arm "I– I– I've wasted too much of your time already, I need to get back home and–"

Nancy instantly set the mugs and tissues on the table and reached out

to grab both of Barbara's hands with her own, plunking down on the couch and pulling Barbara back down with her.

"Barbara. I know that you're deeply upset, and you have every right to be," her voice was warm but with an undercurrent of steel in it "But right now I need you to listen to what I have to say to you,"

Something about the authority in her tone stunned Barbara into silence. She stifled the next wave of sobs into a sniffle. Blinking to try and clear her vision, looking towards Nancy to give the older woman her undivided attention.

Nancy pulled a deep breath in through her nose and looked her straight in the eye "Barbara I am approaching seventy years old, I've got more years behind me than ahead of me, and I quit suffering fools a long time ago," the hands covering her own squeezed "The only reason I'm sitting on this couch with you right now is because I want to, you're not tricking me, you're not manipulating me. The reason I'm here right now is because I want to be,"

Emotion, both relieving and painful, flooded through Barbara's chest, her mouth dropped open but before she could get a single word out Nancy spoke up again.

"And quite frankly you aren't in a fit state to go anywhere,"

"Buh– buh–" she stammered "But I have to get back to Ji–"

"Jim will be alright dearie, I haven't seen him but we did speak on the phone, and he has Toby and all the girls with him, right now you need to focus on you,"

“But he– he– he tried to hug me, and I– I– shoved him away, I–”

Barbara felt another wave of sobs rising up threatening to shatter her fragile composure.

Nancy considered her for a moment “Alright, here’s what we’re going to do. In the morning, once you’ve had enough time to calm down, you are going to explain yourself to Jim and apologize. Then we’ll give him as much time and space as he needs, but I have a good feeling that he’s not going to hold your actions against you,”

“Buh– but, I have to go!” Barbara again tried to rise from the couch “Jim must be so upset and–”

“That’s enough of that talk,” Nancy’s voice took on a sharp, but not unkind, edge “Jim may be upset, but he has Toby. Toby’s a good boy and he’s more than capable of being there for Jim right now, you know that right?”

Again stunned into silence, Barbara found herself frantically nodding her head.

“And they have the girls to, each of those girls has a good head on her shoulders, and between the five of them they’ll all be alright for the night. Right now what we need to focus on is you,”

Flabbergasted, Barbara just sat there; soft, whimpering sobs bubbling out and tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Now, did James hurt or threaten any of you?”

“Buh– but how– how did you know James was…”

Nancy’s expression turned from firm to contrite “Dearie, you weren’t quiet…”

A hot wave of shame surged up Barbara’s throat, pushing behind her eyes and turning her vision blurry again. She barely managed to mumble out a ‘no’ before the flood of fresh sobs crashed into her, crumpling in on herself on the couch.

From the side she felt Nancy’s arm wrapping around her, and Barbara was so exhausted she found herself leaning into the embrace.

Maybe it was the stress of the situation, or emotions running high, but for whatever reason the words seemed to tumble out on their own.

“I– I failed Jim, I promised I’d protect him and keep him safe and I– I–”

The arm around her shoulders tightened “I understand Barbara, more than you think. When I got the call that told me my son and daughter in law were never coming home, with Toby sleeping on the couch ten feet away, I wanted nothing more than to grab him and hide him away from the world and never let anything bad happen to him–”

Nancy choked, pausing to suck in a deep breath before continuing “But that’s just not possible, and even if it was, it would only amount to him living in a cage,”

If Barbara wasn't already sitting down she would have fallen to the ground. A hammer to her chest would have hurt less than those words.

Ten years of keeping her son locked up in the house, throwing him in the basement when he misbehaved, only letting him out on a glorified leash.

And now as a teenager, a mature responsible teenager with mature responsible friends, when he wanted to go out, even just to the woods with his friends, her first thought was to shove him back into that cage–

The same cage she'd kept him in for over a decade.

And this whole thing was her fault from the start, she was the one who exposed him to the poison that had tainted his life beyond repair.

If she had only been smarter, sharper, more aware of her surroundings, none of this would have happened.

A sound halfway between a sob and a strangled moan escaped her, Nancy patting her back as more jagged cries tumbled out.

"I'm a terrible mother…"

"No, you're not,"

"I–"

“Barbara you listen to me good.” the steel came back to Nancy’s tone with a vengeance, briefly snapping Barbara out of her crying to sit bolt upright at attention.

“I’ve known you for over a decade, and you’ve raised Jim to be one of the most thoughtful, caring young men I know. Quite frankly you must have done something right,”

“Buh but– James, he admitted, how much he didn’t care, he– he laughed! I should have known, I should have cut him out before he– he– he–” her words trailed off into a wail.

“Don’t you *dare* take that man’s failings on yourself. He made his choices and you are *not* responsible for them.”

“ *You don’t understand!* ” Barbara’s voice was practically a shriek “I had a responsibility towards Jim and I– I– I–”

Nancy’s face softened “Barbara you’re one of the most dedicated, hardworking people I know, but you can’t read minds or see the future, and you can’t–”

“But I’m his *mother!* ” the word exploded out of her in a gush of tears “I need to protect him from things like this, I *need* to be strong for him, I *owe* it to him!”

Nancy just stared at her, an unreadable expression on her face, she was silent for the longest time before speaking up again.

“Barbara dear, the hospital you work at, it takes a lot of people to give all the patients the care they need; doctors like you, nurses, technicians, even the custodians and cafeteria workers. To take good care of patients all of you need to work together, right?”

Slightly confused now, Barbara still managed to nod in reply.

“I don’t think you’re a bad mother,” Nancy squeezed her hands “I think that for the past ten years you’ve been one person trying to run an entire hospital by yourself,”

Barbara just stared at her, momentarily too stunned to even cry.

There it was, her whole situation laid bare in front of her. Cut and sorted in clean terms Barbara couldn’t deny.

Not even to herself any more.

She couldn’t do this, no matter how much she tried or how hard she fought she just couldn’t do this.

“You’ve been carrying this by yourself for so long,” Nancy’s voice was soft “But you shouldn’t have to, and you don’t,”

“But I–”

Two hands were placed firmly on each of her shoulders. Nancy’s warm gaze meeting Barbara’s watery one “I’m here for you Barbara. Tonight I’m going to sit here while you get this all out of your system, and

then in the morning I'll help you work on a solution and make a plan,"

Barbara's eyes burned, something hot but not altogether unpleasant fluttering inside her chest, she opened her mouth but nothing came out.

"You're strong Barbara, one of the strongest people and mothers I've ever known," the hands on her shoulders tightened "But no one should have to be that strong forever, everyone needs to be weak sometimes,"

She couldn't move, the delicate thing inside her chest tearing her apart more completely and thoroughly than the tide of grief ever could.

"And I'm telling you Barabara, you're not alone and neither is Jim, he has his friends and you have me," Nancy moved her arms from Barbara's shoulders to around her neck and back, pulling her into a tight hug "You've fought so hard for so long all by yourself, but you don't have to anymore. It's ok to share your burden, Jim is going to be ok, and you will to,"

The last thread of control inside her snapped, Barbara letting herself completely surrender into Nancy's embrace. Everything she'd been holding together for so long falling to pieces.

And it *hurt* .

She'd been carrying so much, swallowed so many teeth, having them all spill out at once was agonizing.

But even as it tore her up inside, all her faults and shortcomings ripping at her soul like so many thorns, it was just as relieving as it was painful.

She'd failed, she'd tried so hard every day for the past ten years and she'd failed in the worst ways possible.

But it wasn't her against the world, not any more, if it ever was. She could fall apart and Jim would still be ok. He had his friends to hold him up and she had someone to hold her while she cried.

And there were so many tears.

Barbara buried her face into the sleeve of Nancy's dress, clinging to the older woman with everything she had, sobbing into her shoulder while Nancy patted her back.

As much as it hurt, in the past ten years she'd never felt so light.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry this chapter took so long (January was a pretty crap month for me both personally and financially) and I know I said on my tumblr that this story would have a total of 37 chapters….but I lied. While drafting I wasn't happy with how things were flowing and ended up adding another chapter, now the total number of chapters is 38 (for real this time). Also, for fans of the Owl House this chapter has a reference to it, see if you can spot it.
>
> Now the origins of the bathbomb of doom are finally revealed. To fill in the gaps, during the fall of Camelot Merlin's workshop was looted and someone pinched some troll potion, which ended up in the hands of James' ancestor. It was passed down through the generations before James decided to use it to end his marriage in a blaze of sour grapes, only for Jim to end up in the line of fire

instead.

So the reason the bathbomb turned Jim into a human by day and troll by night is due to two things. One, the potion was way way past its expiration date, the magical equivalent of milk sitting out on the counter for several days. Two, it was contaminated with the baking soda James mixed in to disguise it as a bathbomb along with various bits of dust and debris from over the centuries. These two things "tainted" the potion and caused the abnormal effects. Theoretically, if the potion was to be cured, the cure would have to factor in exactly how old the potion was and exactly what impurities were mixed in and how much of each. And even if the exact age of the potion could be calculated, there's absolutely no way of knowing exactly what got mixed into it over the past 900 years, or even the exact amount of baking soda James mixed in. So for all intents and purposes, neutralizing the potion is impossible. Shifting half-troll Jim is here to stay.

And Barbara's a pretty strong person, after everything she's been through she's not going to break easily. But learning that she spent ten years digging into a red herring within seconds of seeing the ugly true colors of her ex husband….that would do it.

So as you can see Barbara isn't in a good place mentally, at all, but she's finally admitted to herself that she can't do this all on her own and opened herself up to the support of others. And these are the first crucial steps towards long term healing.

Walter

Chapter Notes

> The Owl House reference in the last chapter was Barbara tossing James out and breaking his nose, referencing when Lilith punched Phillip and broke his nose. And like Philip James' nose will remain permanently crooked as a result.
>
> Fair warning this chapter has some triggering content in it. Strickler's plans for the eternal night come up and they are pretty....yikes.
>
> So this is your warning, proceed with caution, here be dragons. More specific, spoiler filled tags in the bottom notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Strickler quickly turned and hustled down the side hall of the museum, going as fast as he dared without running, which would only gather unwanted attention, and jostle the delicate contents of the tote bag dangling from his arm. He'd only have a brief window of time to step away from the field trip without being missed and he needed to make the most of it. Keeping his package concealed the entire morning had been challenging in and of itself, now he needed to get it secure before–

"Mr. Strickler?" a familiar but hesitant voice called out from behind him.

He froze midstep, slowly turning his head while discreetly concealing the bag in front of his body, catching sight of Jim Lake at the end of the hall peering at him from around the corner "Yes?"

"You…have a second?"

He didn't, he *really* didn't.

Strickler planted both feet on the ground and turned around fully, moving the bag behind his back to keep it out of sight “Of course, what do you need?”

Jim stepped into the hall and approached, only speaking again when the two of them were less than ten feet apart “I…just wanted to say thanks, I’ve been talking to one of the therapists on the list you gave me, they've been a big– a *huge* help,”

“Well I’m happy to hear that,”

Jim smiled up at him, but then his expression slipped into something inquisitive as he peeked around the side of him “Oh…you having lunch?”

Strickler bit back a sigh, how unfortunate, he’d been so successful all morning only to fail due to Jim’s unfortunately sharp skills of observation. Now that the boy had seen this much there was no point in concealing it any further “Actually this is something else, here, let me show you…”

He set the bag down on a side table, Jim stepping up to his side as he reached in and pulled out–

“Cookies?”

Strickler flashed him a sheepish grin while setting the plastic container down in the table “Chocolate chip to be precise, I always keep a box on hand for when I find myself a bit peckish in the afternoon. Although I would appreciate if you kept your knowledge of my little stash to yourself, Señor Uhl has a *vicious* sweet tooth,”

He allowed his smile to turn conspiratorial, popping the tabs of the box open “And I would be more than willing to buy your silence,”

Jim’s face lit up “Sure thanks!”

Still smiling, Strickler gestured towards the open container, Jim reaching in to snag a cookie, immediately taking a large bite out of it.

“So uh,” his words were muffled by cookie crumbs, he flushed scarlet then swallowed “I think I’ll be in your class next year, right?”

Stricker felt a trickle of genuine affection slowly run through him, softening out the sharp edges of irritation at being delayed “Yes I teach the next level of world history as well, and I look forward to seeing James Lake Junior again in the fa–”

“Just Jim, actually,” the boy’s face abruptly went from sunny to stony “I’m dropping the junior and going by Jim Lake now,”

Strickler’s mouth had been open to send Jim back to the rest of his schoolmates but now he hesitated.

He’d known for a while that Jim’s home situation was…turbulent, but this wasn’t the first indicator today that an extremely troubling event had occurred. That had been when Jim’s entire friend group had been dropped off at the school this morning in Mr. Nuñez’s vehicle. The second had been how somber and subdued the five of them had been despite it being the last day of school, only just now brightening when Strickler had given him a cookie of all things. Perhaps a check in was in order–

No, he shouldn't.

He was running late enough as it was, and besides, Jim had a professional to discuss his woes with. And while Walter Strickler was many things, a licensed therapist he was not, though granted he would have been if he hadn't been busy keeping the states and the soviet union from destroying the planet for five decades. But the fact of the matter was there were certain subjects directly relating to his family and home life that Jim was no doubt better off discussing with a trained professional as opposed to a well meaning educator.

Still…

While a trained therapist he was not, Strickler was capable of serving as a sounding board and occasional dispenser of advice; and he was more than confident in his ability to draw the line. And while he was running late he certainly wouldn't mind prolonging this particular chore.

He turned toward Jim fully, schooling his features to show the appropriate levels of concern "Is everything alright with you and your mother?"

Jim's sullen look hardened into a frown, hand holding the cookie falling to his side and head dropping "No. He– my *dad* ," the word was spat on a wave of venom "Showed up at our house, we all got into a fight, and he found out how hard things had been for me and mom, how much we struggled after he left, and he…..he laughed,"

The boy snapped his head back up, a startling echo of something almost trollish in the look of fury on his face "He found out how much we'd been hurting for years and he thought it was *funny* ,"

Strickler, who prided himself on his ability to remain composed even in the most dire of situations, had to take a moment to recover from his shock. He'd known somewhat of the strife surrounding the Lake family situation, but for the boy's father to go so far as to break in–

"Are you and your mother alright, he didn't try to hurt either of you did he?"

"Oh no," just as quickly as it had come the fire in Jim's expression vanished "He didn't try to hurt us, just acted all smug," a vindictive smile curled on his face "Until mom kicked his ass out,"

In the interest of deniability Strickler opted not to ask whether he was being metaphorical or literal.

"So yeah," Jim shrugged, the action too exaggerated to be completely natural "We may share DNA, but he is *not* my dad,"

This was running deeper than Strickler expected, better reign things in "I'm happy that you're safe, and that you trust me enough to share this, have you discussed these events with your therapist yet?"

Jim instantly flushed and looked down, shifting from foot to foot "Oh yeah, I called him this morning, gonna go see him after school. Kurt's been *really* great; letting me vent, helping me get out of my own head, reminding me that all my friends probably don't secretly hate me,"

The laughter that followed those words was painfully forced.

Strickler let a genuine frown creep into his deliberate mask of concern, Jim clearly meant it as a joke, but hearing Jim say something so concerning so casually was…troubling. And he couldn't take a therapist's place in helping Jim unlearn such a mindset, but maybe….

"Jim, you don't have to understand others' decision to spend time with you, but you should respect their choice to do so as smart thinking people,"

He took half a step closer "And I know your friends, I've graded their exams, and while a few of them could certainly stand to apply themselves to their essay questions a bit more, I can safely say that they are all intelligent, highly capable individuals. And if you trust them in other regards you should trust them with their choice in friends,"

Jim blinked up at him, abject shock wiping his expression clean "I've…never thought of it like that…"

Strickler smiled down at him, and feeling surprisingly bold, spoke up again "And while I can't speak for anyone else, personally I consider you a brilliant young man, and many would be lucky to call you a friend,"

For an instant Strickler thought he'd gone too far, but then he quickly realized it wasn't discomfort holding the boy's tongue.

"You…really think so?" he said softy, staring up at him with wide eyes.

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't,"

“Oh, uh, th- thanks,” Jim smiled weakly at him “That…means a lot,”

“I’m always happy to help, now you should be getting back to the group before Ms. Janeth notices your absence, and perhaps finish that cookie before you do,”

“Got it, on my way,” Jim turned and began walking back down the hall, turning and waving as he went “Thanks Mr. Strickler,”

“Of course,” Strickler called after him “My door is always open,”

Jim vanished from sight around the corner, footsteps slowly fading into silence. Strickler lingered in his spot next to the side table for a few moments, affable smile slowly falling off his face. Once he was certain Jim would not return he tucked the plastic pack of cookies back in the bag and continued down the hall, stepping through the small door at the end.

He was immediately greeted by smoldering red eyes and hot, rancid breath.

“You should have let the child stay,” Bular loomed from the shadows, this small storage room one of the few places free from sunlight during the day “I could use a snack,”

If Bular hadn’t been glaring at him Strickler would have rolled his eyes. He could make a jab about how a student going missing in the middle of a museum in broad daylight during a field trip would attract a dangerous level of scrutiny, but logic had a habit of going in one ear and out the other when it came to Bular.

Thinly veiled insults lent themselves much better to memory.

“You really shouldn’t think with your stomach, it’s never lead you to good things,”

The narrowing of red eyes told Strickler his barb had hit home. Provoking Bular like this was dangerous, but the brute had been a thorn in his side for centuries, let him seethe for a bit.

“You should be more focused on freeing my father and not on the fawning attention of fleshbag whelps,” Bular growled, turning and stalking further into the room “Was it really necessary to entertain the human for that long?”

It hadn’t been, but pushing Bular’s buttons was one of the few sources of guilty pleasure in Strickler’s life. Not to mention he’d much rather converse with Jim Lake than tear his hair out trying to explain basic strategy to Bular any day.

Granted, the same could be said about trying to convince Mr Pepperjack that the pyramids weren’t built by martian shapeshifters, or getting a root canal.

Instead of voicing these traitorous thoughts he hoisted the tote bag over his shoulder and followed Bular deeper into the room “It’s all part of maintaining my cover as a respectable educator,”

From out of nowhere Bular whirled on him, teeth bared and hands twitching for his jawblades. Strickler froze midstep, cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

Had to be cautious now, violence was dangerously close. If it came to it it wouldn't be the first time Bular threw him into a wall, nor likely the last, but Strickler preferred to keep those instances as few and far between as possible

"Explain to me then, *impure* ," the slur fell heavy from the large troll's lips "How the fleshbags opinions of you are so crucial in freeing my father?"

Strickler let out a heavy sigh, exaggerated to the point even Bular could pick up on it "If you insist,"

It was aggravating to have to justify his every action to Bular, but this would give the perfect opportunity to push the brute's perspective in the right direction.

He set the tote bag aside on top of one of the many crates around them, folding his arms behind his back before turning and facing Bular directly "It is important to be perceived as kind and approachable, this causes the humans to trust me,"

Strickler gestured to the bag "You saw how easily he accepted food from me, one of the many benefits of building a reputation as a trusted mentor, which means that on the day of your father's return my students won't suspect that the day's treat has been dosed with a little of this," Strickler pulled a small amber bottle out of the inner pocket of his blazer, something far too precious to carry in a tote bag "Sending them all into a deep sleep, allowing me to transport them to the museum with ease and discretion,"

Tucking the bottle back into his pocket, he straightened his lapels before looking back up at Bular, lips curled into an artful smirk "Then when your father arrives he'll have a meal ready and waiting to eat, a little something to kindle his and his troops' appetites before the true

feast begins,”

Bular snarled but his shoulders lowered, arms relaxing, showing that the immediate threat had passed “Your attempts to curry my father’s favor are as pathetic as they are obvious, *impure* ,”

Strickler turned to pick up the bag, rolling his eyes when he was confident Bular couldn’t see before resuming their trek into the room. Hardly surprising the brute only saw the most surface level implications of his plan, of course it was for the better that Bular didn’t guess his true intentions.

If gifting him his students won him some of the Skullcrusher’s favor all the better, but what mattered was that while his students’ deaths would be brutal and messy, due to their drugged sleep they would also be swift and painless.

A twinge of something dark and heavy flickered in Strickler’s chest before he smothered it.

The culling of his students wasn’t anything Strickler was looking forward to–

A bright smile spread across Jim’s face as he bit into the cookie, the first genuine one in months.

But it needed to be done.

Gunmar would reclaim the surface and water the land with human blood, regardless of anything Strickler did or didn’t do. One way or another his students were all living on borrowed time, and if Strickler

couldn't spare their lives he would ensure he spared their suffering.

Bular came to a halt with Strickler doing the same, the two having reached their destination.

Millennia ago Strickler had once considered leveraging his position to keep some humans alive and under his protection during the eternal night, but after so many centuries whatever sweetness attached to that idea had long since turned sour.

Gunmar would no doubt respond to such a request by eating the lot of them on the spot. And even if he was successful at protecting some humans, what kind of existence would the eternal night be for them? Living as little better than pets, favored livestock spared slaughter but condemned to watch their would burn, the threat of the knife never too far away should they step out of line. Existing as the lowest of the low under the heels of their Gumm Gumm masters.

The same existence Strickler had suffered through for as long as he could remember.

The heaviness in his gut returned with vengeance, Strickler having to exert some force to disperse it.

No, any attempt at preserving human life would ultimately only be serving Strickler's own ego. As painful as it would be for him, Strickler would ensure his students' last memories were of sweetness and peaceful slumber.

Bular sniffed at the boxes piled against the back wall, boxes containing a *very* special traveling exhibit, pawing through the crates and scrutinizing their contents "You should spend less time on your schemes and more working towards my father's return," he groused,

not even raising his head from his foraging.

Strickler leveled the troll with a cool gaze “The speed at which the bridge is assembled is irrelevant,”

Bular whirled away from the crates, smoldering glare landing on Strickler “How d–”

“The bridge may as well be rubble without the amulet to open it,”

Bular smoldered in silence, eyes positively burning into Strickler, knowing that the changeling had a valid point but his pride refusing to allow him to admit it.

“Rather than micromanaging me,” he folded his arms behind his back, a perfect picture of professional composure “You should be focusing on your battle with the Trollhunter,”

A coarse growl rumbled out of Bular “The Trollhunter *will* fall by my hand, I *will* claim the amulet and release my father, and the humans will burn as we retake the surface for trollkind!”

Strickler nonchalantly polished his fingernails on his shirt “Oh I’m sure you will,”

Chapter End Notes

tw: non consensual drugging, mercy killing, humans being killed and eaten

How morally gray can I make Strickler? Let's find out.

He does genuinely care for his students and wants the best for

them, but he also views Gunmar's return as inevitable and wide scale death and destruction of humankind as completely unavoidable. On one hand he has enough objectivity to realize that trying to protect some humans during the eternal night would be soothing his own ego more than genuinely giving them good lives, but on the other hand his solution to drug and mercy kill them isn't all that great either.

Next time: the kids regroup and talk about what comes next.

Toby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Toby Pie, do you want some juice boxes and goldfish for your friends?”

“Sounds great Nana, I’ll come get them,”

Toby pushed away from his desk, where he’d been watching the sun sink steadily lower in the sky, and hustled downstairs, welcoming the distraction. Stepping into the kitchen he saw that Nana had already dumped the carton of goldfish into a bowl and set them on a tray with the juice boxes.

“So the girls will be getting a ride home from Mr. Scott?” she smiled at him from across the table.

“Yep,” he smiled back and picked up the tray, but before he could move Nana stepped around the table and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“When Jim gets here you be sure to remind him that he can stay with us as long as he likes, not just this week,”

Toby flinched at the reminder but did his best not to show it “Got it, will do,”

“Ok then,” she released him “You kids have fun with your nintendo games,”

Toby gave her a nod “Thanks Nana, and thanks for the snacks to,”

He turned and headed back up the stairs, carefully balancing the tray in both hands. Getting up to his room, Toby gently set it down on his desk before shooting an uneasy glance at the orange sky outside the window. The girls would be here any minute, Claire’s dad was dropping them off and Darci’s dad would pick them up. Jim had split from the rest of them after school to go see his therapist, with the plan to meet up with them at Toby’s after swinging by his own place to pack a bag.

But Jim should have been here by now, or sent him a text, or *something* . The sun had gone down a while ago but it was still light out, that meant Jim still had time, right?

Guts in a pretzel, Toby pulled out his phone only for his heart to stop. Jim *had* texted him, twenty minutes ago. He’d sent a text that said.

Come to the window

Toby all but ran to the window and threw it open, hopefully he wasn’t too late and Jim wasn’t–

“Boo,” a voice whispered directly into his ear.

Toby shrieked and jerked back into the room, tumbling to the ground and scrambling backwards on the carpet. Jim’s gravely laughter echoed from outside the window, a duffle bag being tossed into the room before Jim crawled in after it, pulling the hood of his hoodie back, giving Toby a full view of his toothy grin.

Toby narrowed his eyes at him, even as the sharp spike of adrenaline started to fade.

“Toby pie!?” Nana’s concerned voice echoed up from the first floor “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah I’m ok,” he pushed himself upright and got to his feet without breaking eye contact with Jim, who was smirking at him unashamed, heartbeat already stuttering back down to normal “I just saw a spoiler for Monster Slayer Academia,”

“Ok then, you kids have fun with your animes,”

Nana’s voice faded, his standoff with Jim continued in silence, Toby folding his arms across his chest “Were you waiting out there for over twenty minutes just so you could spook me?”

Jim’s already toothy smile got even wider “Worth it,”

Toby still made a show of glaring at him, but he wasn’t really mad. Jim *had* gotten him good, and he could respect commitment to the bit, but still…

“How exactly did you get on the roof without me or Nana noticing?”

“I waited ‘till I changed,” Jim have a half hearted shrug that nearly convinced him “When I’m all big and blue climbing is a cinch,”

Toby blinked “Oh,”

It really wasn’t *that* far between their houses, but it hadn’t been too long ago that Jim never would have even considered leaving his house after dark without a twelve stage plan and at least two, preferably all four, of them there as back up.

Jim must have read the apprehension on his face “It’s fine, it’s only like, twenty feet between our houses and no one was going to spot me, and even if they did I had my hood up, they wouldn’t have seen anything,”

Toby smiled, stepping up to lay a hand on Jim’s elbow, he would have gone for the shoulder but didn’t feel like getting the stepstool “Well good to have you here, how’s your mom doing?”

Jim winced. And Toby immediately started mentally kicking himself.

“Sorry sorry, dumb question,”

“No it’s– it’s fine,” Jim let out a gusty breath, stepped back, and plunked down onto the bed “She’s…still not great, but she’s more… stable I think. I don’t think she’s about to fall apart at least,”

Toby took a seat next to him “She’s staying at the bed and breakfast on the far side of town for the next week, right?”

“Yeah…” Jim turned towards him, eyebrows raised “How did you…”

Toby sheepishly wrung his hands together “I kinda overheard when she and Nana were…talking,”

While no one had said so out loud, given what had happened with James, and what they’d learned. Jim and Dr. Lake’s trip east had been canceled. But with James still at large and Dr. Lake a complete wreck everyone agreed that something had to be done, the issue was Nana and Dr. Lake disagreeing about what that something was.

That…argument, if it could even be called that, was one of the most bizarre conversations Toby had ever heard. Nana trying to convince Dr. Lake to stay at a hotel for a week, Dr. Lake refusing over and over again before finally giving in. Then when Nana tried to pay for her stay the argument started up all over again, now going back and forth over who would pay for Dr. Lake’s hotel room, branching into a whole new argument about Dr. Lake giving Nana money for Jim to stay at their house for the week. It had ended in an uneasy stalemate, with Dr. Lake paying for her hotel and Jim staying with them free of charge. But given how Dr. Lake had left an envelope full of cash on their coffee table and Nana kept looking at spa brochures that war was far from over.

Honestly it would have been funny if the circumstances weren’t so awful.

Jim hissed “Yeah they weren’t quiet, I think the only reason mom agreed in the first place was I promised to call every day at six on the dot,”

Toby shifted uncomfortably “Well…I’m glad your mom’s taking a break,” he laid a hand on Jim’s shoulder, within reach now that Jim was sitting down “She deserves it,”

Jim smiled at him, then abruptly perked up “Girls are here,”

Less than a second later the doorbell rang.

“Have I told you that your super senses are awesomeasuce, because they are *totally* awesomesauce,” Toby hurried towards the door, only pausing briefly to turn back “Back in a flash,”

He headed downstairs to let the girls in, and fend off offers of more juice from Nana, leading them back up to his room where Jim was already setting up the console.

“Hey guys, oh hey Darci you excited about New Orleans?”

She beamed “Heck yeah I am, in less than forty eight hours I’m going to be eating beignets at the best diner in the world,”

Toby let out a low whistle “Lucky,”

“That reminds me,” Mary pulled out her phone “You guys know if you want to come to the cabin party? You don’t have to give me an answer right now, but the sooner the bet–”

“I’m in,”

They all looked up towards Jim. He was standing up straight, hands in his pockets and posture relaxed, but there was an echo of something steely behind his face.

“I can hide in the woods at night, right?”

“Y– yeah,” Mary said with a start.

“Then count me in,”

Toby felt a wide grin spreading across his face as he clambered across the room towards him “This is going to be awesomesauce! You can borrow my– actually, sorry but I don’t think you’re going to fit in my sleeping bag,”

“Th– thanks Toby,” Jim chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. Toby immediately stood at attention. Jim was a terrible liar and an even worse actor, and over the past few months Toby had gotten a lot better at reading his tells. And right now he was giving all the signs of having something weighing on him.

“Everything ok Jimbo?”

“Oh yeah, it’s just…” he sat back on the bed and let out a gust of air “Thank you guys, for everything, especially last night. You guys…have been really great, I couldn’t have made it through all the stuff I have without you,”

Toby went still, both from the warm surge of emotion and the memories from just under twenty four hours ago flashing through his skull.

Having a fun time until James literally barged in, dropping several mega bombs on them, Dr. Lake completely breaking down…

After Nana had taken care of Dr. Lake they'd spent a lot of time doing deep breathing. Then going over what James had revealed and what *exactly* that meant. Then because it was nearly one am, they'd settled in for fitful naps. As dawn got closer, and because they'd all decided it was unavoidable, right as the sun was rising the girls had called their parents; who'd shown up within minutes. After getting hit with several 'Why didn't you call us earlier's and plenty of 'Are you sure he's really gone' and all the adults shouting over each other about what to do; Mr. Nuñez has bustled them all in the back of his car to drop them off at school. Before presumably going back for more shouting.

Toby was actually kind of amazed that the girls got their parents to agree to letting them come to this meet up at Toby's house, especially since James was still at large. Then again Jim had gotten the brunt of the concerned looks this morning, so maybe their worry for him trumped their concerns about James.

Well that and Mr. Nuñez hadn't been nearly as subtle as he thought he was when he passed Claire a tube of pepper spray this morning.

"No worries dude," he clapped a hand on Jim's shoulder "I know you'd return the favor,"

Jim flashed him a weak smile only to have it immediately drop off his face "Yeah, I just wish I hadn't spent so many years living in fear when I didn't have to. It would have been so much easier if I'd just been honest from the start…"

Abruptly the atmosphere of the room got ten times heavier.

After a few tense seconds Claire spoke up "Hey don't worry about it,

you were playing it safe, you had no idea who you could trust wi–”

“No– I– that’s just the thing, I *did* ,” Jim’s hands plopped down into his lap, looking up at all of them, expression pained “You guys weren’t strangers, you were my *friends* . You were never anything but kind to me, and you didn’t do anything to deserve my distrust, and I…I should have given you a chance, before things got so bad,”

This time Toby heard the echo of something bitter in Jim’s voice, setting his own stomach churning uncomfortably. Wracking his brain knowing that he couldn’t just let Jim say something like that and leave it but unable to think of anything to say. He was still trying to think of something to counter it when Darci beat him to the punch.

“We…all did things we shouldn’t have over the past few months,” she took a few steps towards him “Maybe things would have been better if we’d done different things, but we didn’t. We can’t go back and change the past, all we can do is learn from it and move on, so we shouldn’t waste the present moaning about it,”

Jim blinked at her with wide eyes, the mood of the room shifting again, still heavy but not nearly as uncomfortable, before his face broke into an easy smile “You’re right, thanks Darc,”

“No problem,”

“No more wasting the present,” Jim abruptly stood and moved back towards the console “So let’s get Go Go Sushi fired up,”

They all laughed, the last of the tension in the room breaking and falling away. Toby went to grab the snack off his desk when he spotted the *other* object he’d gotten out earlier. Hand freezing in midair.

It didn't stand out overly, in a lot of ways it was identical to most household flashlights, but with one key difference…

He'd been planning on asking Jim about this for some time. But Jim was so nervous at first and then the thing with James happened and his mom was in a bad way, and the girls were here now and despite how messed up the timing was he couldn't help but think about asking him now–

You were never anything but kind to me, we can't go back and change the past, all we can do is learn from it and move on, if I want to say no I'll say no–

Toby let out a deep breath, passed over the tray, and grabbed the object. He would ask, Jim could handle just being asked, and if the answer was no he'd accept it and move on.

"Hey Jim…"

"Yeah?"

"Before we start sushi slinging there's something I wanted to ask you about,"

"Sure, I'm all ears,"

Toby slowly turned around, seeing the others all sitting on the floor by the console "So you…change at sunrise and sunset and when you're underground…"

One of Jim's eyebrows quirked up "Uh huh?"

"Well…what about uv light?"

Four sets of wide eyes blinked back at him. Toby felt his face heat up but forced himself to keep going "I've got a uv light right here if you wanted to…test it, but if not that's totally–"

"No– no, it's ok. I've just…never thought about that before, and I'm fine with…testing it," Jim rolled back one of his sleeves and held out his arm, fingers wriggling.

Heart in his throat, Toby walked back holding the uv light, the girls watching with rapt attention "So how do you want to…."

"Just shine it on my arm," Jim wiggled his four fingers, flashing Toby a grin that was only slightly nervous.

Knowing he was going to chicken out if he waited any longer, Toby flicked the light on, bathing Jim's hand and forearm in purple light, blue skin appearing indigo.

But other than that nothing happened. No sprouting feathers or shedding skin or eyeballs popping up. Nothing.

Toby moved to take the light away, but Jim held up a hand to stop him, his gaze never once leaving his forearm.

“Hang on, I think…I think something’s happening,”

Toby kept the light where it was, all five of them keeping their eyes locked on Jim's arm, breath held.

And as he watched, he slowly but surely realized something was happening.

The deep indigo of his skin was lightening, gradually shifting into violet. Dark fingernails turning pale, and a pinky *sprouting* from the side of his hand.

Then they were looking at Jim’s *normal human arm* bathed in purple light, still attached to the rest of Jim’s big blue stony self.

“Holy frijoles…” Claire whispered.

Toby was too stunned to talk right now, but he shared the sentiment.

Sunset turned him from human to gargoyle, sunrise was gargoyle to human. Underground turned him stony no matter what time of day it was, and now they knew uv light did the same in reverse, turning stone back into flesh. But what did it all mean? What was the connection here–

Abruptly Jim whipped his arm away, the second it was out of the uv light it became blue and stony again, so fast Toby didn’t even notice the transformation.

“Nope, that’s enough of that,” Jim said, shaking his arm out.

Toby flicked off the light and set it on the edge of the desk “Sorry, did that….hurt?”

“It didn’t hurt, it just felt really…not great. Like, normally when it happens it's so quick I barely feel it, but this happened so slow it felt *slimy* , and really *really* not great, and have any of you guys ever tried growing a pinky in slow motion? Not fun,”

Things were silent for a few beats.

“I can safely say that I have never grown a pinky in slow motion,” Toby spoke up “But the second I do you four will be the first people I tell,”

Everyone laughed, more at the ease of the tension breaking than anything else.

Jim chuckled before his face abruptly turned serious again “While… while we’re on this, there’s something…else I want to tell you guys, something I haven’t even told my mom,”

Toby felt the ba-dumb of his heartbeat skyrocketing but willed himself not to react “Ok then, we’re all ears,” he plunked down on the floor and sat at attention, the girls all doing the same.

Jim pulled in a deep breath, let it go, and then spoke “So just over a year ago, when me and mom were camping up in Sequoia, one night when I was out walking in the woods I saw…well…I’m not sure what I saw,”

Mary leaned forward “Describe it,”

“Well…there were a lot of them, at least twenty, maybe more. And they were about the size of cats…but that’s not what they were, not even close,”

Another shaky breath left him as he pulled his legs up to the bed to fold underneath him “They were green, no fur, long spindly arms and legs, kind of like monkeys, but…”

His voice hitched “When they looked at me…I could tell they weren’t just regular animals, they were intelligent, when they looked at me they knew exactly what I was,”

The silence that filled the room was deafening, Toby could see all the girls mouths hanging open even while he struggled to shut his own jaw.

“So there are other…magic…things out there,” Darci spoke up, voice small.

“Yeah,” Jim said, his own voice low and soft “I don’t know what all stuff is out there, but it’s out there,”

Stunned silence filled the room, with Toby contributing more than his fair share.

He’d had a hunch, ever since they’d learned about Jim’s transformation, that there might be more out there. If magical curses

and shapeshifting were real, who's to say other things weren't real to? Things like magic and monsters and things going bump in the night.

But having a hunch was one thing, concrete evidence that there actually *was* more out there was something else entirely.

More heavy silence filled the room, not suffocating, but close, until Claire cleared her throat.

"Well then, we'll just have to figure it out together,"

Hearing those words was like a tuning fork being run in Toby's head.

This was scary and new, the world was a whole lot wilder and more dangerous than he'd ever imagined, but he didn't have to deal with it alone. None of them did.

Toby slid over until he was pressing into Jim's side "Yep we're a team, you're stuck with us for life, shapeshifting and weird fantasy creatures and all,"

Jim looked down at him, expression tender, and smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter fought me like you wouldn't believe, as in I've had gentler beatings in the Denny's parking lot compared to the trouble this chapter gave me.
>
> Also another Owl house reference in this chapter, see if you can spot it!

Barbara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing she was aware of was a sense of gentle warmth surrounding her. Slowly other sensations made themselves known, soft fabric around her arms and legs, something silky pressing against her cheek, gray darkness surrounding her as her eyes slowly blinked open and closed. But as more and more awareness crept in, she was hit with a growing sense of unease.

Barbara's eyes fluttered and stayed open this time, between the low lighting and her lack of glasses she couldn't see clearly. But she saw enough to realize the unfamiliarity of her surroundings. A stab of alarm shot through her for a split second before the memories came rushing back, slamming into her like a ton of bricks.

Nancy.

Her breakdown.

James…

Jim –

Something slimy twisted to life in her gut. Any remnants of peaceful slumber dashed away by adrenaline and shame.

Swallowing back the sudden nausea, Barbara pushed herself upright and reached over to grab her glasses and phone off the nightstand.

7:37am

Later than normal for her but not a terrible time to wake up. Her alarm had been set for eight so she wouldn't miss her appointment. It was a miracle she was able to get one so last minute on Friday morning in the first place and didn't have to wait until next week or even longer than that.

There was also a text notification from Nancy. Tapping it revealed a picture of Jim and Toby in their pajamas sitting at the table in the Domzalski's kitchen. They were smiling and waving at the camera, poptarts in hand and crumbs smeared on their faces.

The caption Nancy had sent with the picture was 'The boys enjoy their breakfast'.

She found herself fixing on Jim's image, something about it striking a dull pang in her chest. The t-shirt and sweatpants he was wearing were so big they were practically falling off. How long after his change was this picture taken? Was he struggling to keep it hidden from Nancy?

Her throat tightened.

Barbara thought she was done with the outbursts, that she'd already let all the writhing tumultuous emotions out leaving her scooped out and empty of emotion. But it was becoming clear that she was wrong.

Oh god what was she *doing?* Lazing around in a hotel on the opposite side of town, abandoning her vulnerable child all alone to fend for himself–

Before she fully realized what she was doing Barbara was up and moving, whipping the rest of the covers back and hustling to the other side of the dark room to rummage through her suitcase while pulling up her contacts.

She needed to get herself together get dressed and go home, make sure Jim was alright, appointment be damn–

Her fingers froze just over the call button next to Jim's number, hanging there poised in the air, her other hand gripping her blouse, fingers balling up in the fabric.

Barbara pulled in a deep breath, then darkened her phone and set it down in the dresser. Shutting her eyes and going through her breathing cycles.

Jim wasn't a little boy who needed his mommy every single minute of the day. He was fifteen, he could more or less take care of himself. And he wasn't alone, he had Toby, and Nancy, even the girls and their families if things got really bad.

Calling him wouldn't be for his sake, it would be for hers. And Barbara *refused* to burden her child with her anxiety like that. Besides, even if he did need it she certainly wasn't in any kind of position to provide Jim, or anyone, any kind of support.

Her stomach churned painfully as her fingers tightened into claws around her blouse and the edge of the dresser.

No matter how badly she wanted to Barbara couldn't drop everything and run to her son's side. She wasn't ok, she hadn't been for a long

time, and she couldn't keep shoving her issues to the side and pretending they didn't exist. Not any more.

Things needed to change, *she* needed to change, and this appointment was the first step towards that.

Fighting the urge to run down to her car and head straight to the Domzalski house, or lie back in bed and pull the covers over her head, Barbara squared her shoulders and replied to Nancy's text with a smiley face. Then moved over to the switch and flicked on the lights. Blinking in the sudden brightness she walked into the small bathroom to splash some water in her face before getting dressed.

By the time she finished putting herself together it was 8:02am, well ahead of schedule but now she had time for a nice leisurely breakfast that would hopefully settle her nerves. Slinging her purse over her shoulder, Barbara stepped out of the room and headed towards the stairs. This hotel was a small one, only three floors and no elevators, so she found herself in the breakfast nook after only a thirty second walk.

Stepping into the room, she saw that although the space was small, four two seater tables and a counter against the far wall that held all the food, there was only one other person here. A man sitting at one of the tables working on his computer, who didn't so much as twitch at Barbara's entrance– actually he was so engrossed in his laptop he probably wouldn't have noticed if Barbara had walked into the room naked. So she more or less had the space to herself.

She eyed the food selection on the counter. A cold cereal bar, a waffle iron spattered in batter, green bananas hanging over bruised, sad looking apples, pasty bagels in a box next to individual packages of cream cheese.

Getting breakfast at a restaurant was technically possible within her timetable, but she'd be cutting it close, and Barbara couldn't risk missing her appointment, not when she'd barely been able to get it in the first place.

Were Jim and Toby laughing and joking over their poptarts right now?

Blinking away the sudden wetness in her eyes, Barbara hustled over to the waffle maker.

Waffles, those looked like a halfway decent choice for a filling breakfast.

Stepping over to the waffle iron, Barbara grabbed the batter scoop and got to work.

Just over six and a half minutes later, she knew because of the clock on the wall and the timer on the waffle iron, Barbara was sitting at a table with a waffle and a cup of coffee. She cut off a chunk and raised it to her mouth, the plasticy sweetness of corn syrup masquerading as maple syrup, something Jim never would have tolerated in their kitchen, spreading across her tongue.

Eating was easy. The human body needed fuel to function and that was food. Sugar and fat were good sources of energy, a mild dose of caffeine would chase away the last cobwebs of sleep and help her stay sharp. So right now shoveling syrups soaked bites of waffle into her mouth and washing it down with coffee that wasn't great, but was still better than what the hospital provided, was the best thing she could do for herself.

If only all her problems could be solved so easily, but that was probably something they'd discuss at her appointme–

Barbara shoved the thought out of her mind and another bite of waffle into her mouth.

Once she was finished with her meal, technically early but still all too soon, Barbara stepped out of the lobby and walked over to her car. She checked the mirrors carefully before pulling out of the parking lot and onto the stree. Always keeping an eye on the other cars and pedestrians, keenly observing her surroundings as she made her way through the town.

But despite her constant awareness Barbara felt strangely detached from the actions, like she was watching a robot pilot her body.

Was this kind of detachment…healthy? Should she really be driving right now? Was this a delayed reaction to her outb–

Barbara shook her head, then immediately snapped back up to fix her eyes back on the road. It was fine, she was driving safely and appropriately, she'd just bring this up in her appointment…maybe.

After a ten minute drive the building came into view. It was perfectly nondescript and matched the photo on the website, an utterly ordinary brick structure. But the sight still sent Barbara's guts curdling.

She parked the car right up front, part of her was tempted to linger, but they might have cameras on the building and she didn't need anyone dissecting that action.

Only allowing herself a single deep breath to settle the butterflies in her stomach, Barbara grabbed her purse, stepped out of the car, and

headed in.

Directly inside was a waiting room, one that was no doubt identical to thousands of other waiting rooms across the country. All the walls and furniture done in various shades of beige and tan that all somehow reminded her of oatmeal.

Fighting back her nerves, Barbara stepped up the front desk, the receptionist was the only pop of color in the otherwise drab room. Bright blue leggings with a pink floral print and a neon pink and black sweater, brown hair streaked with bright purple.

The receptionist looked up at Barbara from her computer and smiled wide “Hi welcome in, do you have an appointment?”

“Y– yes, nine thirty, for Barbara Lake,”

The receptionist glanced back down at her monitor “Ah yes I see it here, Rose is all set so you can go on back. Room eight, all the way down the hall, last door on the right,”

Barbara nodded in reply, stepping around the side of the desk and heading down the hall to the directed room. Reaching a door labeled eight, she raised a hand, hesitated for just a moment, then softly knocked on the wood.

“Come in,” a voice called from inside.

Barbara cracked the door and peeked inside. In contrast to the waiting room, this entire room was done in warm earthy tones; rich reds, deep browns, and burnt golds. It looked more like someone’s living room

than an office. Most of the space was dominated by cozy looking furniture, plush looking chairs and small tables scattered around. The only aberration was a desk in the corner with a woman close to her age with dark hair in a bun sitting behind it.

“Hello, you must be Barbara,” the woman–

Rose Garcia, LPCC

Said “Come in, sit anywhere you like,”

Barbara gave a nod, forcing down the churning in her gut, shutting the door behind her and moving over to gingerly take a seat at one of the easy chairs. Rose stood and stepped towards her, a soft smile curled on her face “Hi Barbara welcome in, how’s your day going so far?”

“It’s going…well,”

“That’s great, now before we begin I wanted to ask if you minded if I take notes during our meeting today,”

“….notes?”

It was only now that Barbara registered the spiral notebook and pen sitting on the corner of the desk.

“It’s perfectly fine if you’d prefer that I didn’t, whatever you’re most comfortable with,”

“N– no, no, it’s fine,” Barbara managed to stammer out “I don’t mind…notes,”

*You are an adult, you can handle a little note taking. And this woman **needs** to make records of this information, you’re a doctor you know how this works.*

Rose took a seat in the easy chair directly across from Barbara “Are you ready to get started or do you need a minute?”

“I–” Barbara sucked in a bracing breath, trying to slow the rapid stammering of her heart.

You didn’t come here to just sit and chit chat, you came to fix yourself, so put in the work and do it.

“Let’s– let’s go ahead and get started,”

“Alright then,” Rose settled back into her chair, pen and notebook nestled on her lap “I’ve read through your email, but I’d like to start with going over why you’re coming in and what you’d like to accomplish,”

Barbara opened her mouth, shut it, then opened it again. No sound coming out.

Why was she here? A simple, generic question. One that Barbara herself had asked countless patients countless times, but somehow couldn’t manage to answer herself.

All the little reasons that led her to where she was right now, sitting in this chair in this office in front of this woman, were so gnarled and twisted and thorny, untangling them and distilling them into words seemed like an impossible task.

But she had to try, she *needed* to.

Barbara shut her eyes and pulled in another bracing breath, willing the jitters in her arms and legs to still.

Why am I here? Why am I sitting in this chair?

The events from two nights ago flashed in her mind, bodily throwing James out onto the pavement, breaking down sobbing on the floor in front of her son and four of his friends, completely losing control–

Her eyes burned, throat going tight, but she had her answer.

“Something…happened two nights ago that I can’t let happen again,”

Rose didn’t even twitch, just kept her eyes on Barbara with that calm, placid stare “What happened two nights ago?”

Barbara pressed her lips together, face hot, waffle and coffee sitting in the bottom of her stomach like a rock.

Just tell her the worst of it right now. She’s not here to judge you, she’s

here to treat you, she's a professional, she needs this information to make your treatment plan. Your job would be so much easier if a patient was honest from the get go about popping Tylenol after a night of whiskey shots, it's the same for you and her.

"Two nights ago, my son and his friends were having a sleepover when…when my ex husband broke into the house," the words felt like broken glass in her mouth but she forced herself to keep going "Things got heated and I– I physically threw him out,"

Barbara stared down into her lap, glasses already going foggy, but she could still hear the soft scribble of pen on paper across from her "Can you describe what happened between you and your ex husband in detail?"

"Y– yes I can– but that– that's not why I'm here," she pulled herself back upright, giving her head a shake and blinking to clear her vision "The reason I came in today is because of…me,"

"What do you mean?"

"After I threw him– my ex, out, I just…I just broke down completely, screaming and sobbing on the floor, in full view of my son and his friends. I knew what I was doing wasn't ok but I just couldn't stop myself, the kids had to go get my neighbor to come pick me up off the floor and drag me to her couch–"

Barbara choked, stopping herself before the tears could fall, both hands balling into fists in her lap "That can't happen again, ever."

Another scratch of pen on paper "Ok let me make sure I'm understanding you correctly, your goal in coming here is to prevent more breakdowns like the one you suffered two nights ago?"

Barbara nodded, not trusting herself to speak right now.

“Alright then,” more sounds of pen on paper before Rose looked back up at her “Are there any other factors that contributed to your breakdown aside from your ex breaking in?”

“I….”

All the research and work she’d done into looking for a cure for Jim and been for nothing, the real evil had been in their own home all alone, she’d just been too blind and ten years too late in seeing it .

“When James, my ex, broke in things got…heated, and he let it slip just how much contempt he holds for me and Jim, my– our son. He laughed in my face when he learned how much we’ve struggled since he left, and didn’t even care about what he did to Jim…”

Her throat closed off and this time the tears did fall, dribbling down her cheeks and obscuring her lenses in mist. Barbara fumbled for a box of tissues on the table to her side, barely visible through her tear washed vision. Lifting her glasses to dab at her eyes and nose while the blurry shape of Rose sat there quietly. Rose didn’t speak again until Barbara’s vision cleared enough to see her clearly.

“You said that James laughed in response to learning about how you struggled in his absence, can you tell me about those struggles more specifically?”

“I’m a single mother,” the words felt out hard and flat, the instant they left her mouth Barbara regretted them.

Giving sarcastic, unhelpful answers wasn't going to do either of them any good, and was the exact opposite of what she'd come in to accomplish today, but there they were out in the open.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry, it's just…" Barbara hung her head and pinched the bridge of her nose "This isn't something I've really discussed before,"

"It's quite alright, take your time,"

Barbara breathed in and out, two times, three, four; and then forced herself to continue "I guess the reason things were so hard was because it was literally just the two of us. I cut my family off a long time ago because of how toxic they were, and James' family was never involved. Jim's a good kid, but having to do everything all on my own was…hard,"

"Can you tell me more about Jim?"

Another open ended question that no doubt had ulterior motives–

It's not ulterior motives this woman is doing her job, you signed up for this, you knew damn well what you were getting in to.

But one that would be easy to answer.

"Jim is…great. Smart, kind, hardworking, caring…" a soft smile graced her mouth, even though her insides were twisting in on themselves "I couldn't ask for a better child,"

“I know you already said you don’t have any family support. But is there anyone else involved in your lives?”

Her face ignited in a hot flush, she knew her cheeks had to be bright red “A– actually yes, we do have other people in her lives. I– I just was only thinking about family, I swear I’m not trying to be evasive, I– it’s– I just–”

“It’s ok Barbara” Rose cut her off gently “You can take all the time you need to talk about things in your own way. Now would you like to take a few minutes before we continue?

“No– no, I’m fine, let’s keep going,” she sat up straight, pulled in a deep breath, and kept going “Nancy, my neighbor, and Toby, her grandson, have always been close to us, she’s actually watching the boys right now. She’s been…amazing, after I broke down she was the one who helped me get all this organized. Jim and Toby are also close with three other kids their age, and their parents…”

Her throat abruptly went tight again, a vision of yesterday morning flashing through her head. Sitting numbly on Nancy’s couch, blankly watching as the room filled with semi-familiar faces and raised voices. Knowing that she should do something, say something, but unable to find the will, just sitting upright taking all the energy she had. Hearing words of concern f mixed in with pitying glances cast her way.

Until that moment she’d had no idea how pity could sting so much more than contempt.

“They…care, about Jim, I’m pretty sure, at least the way any responsible parent cares about a child that isn’t theirs,” she said

slowly “For me I…I think they pity me more than anything else. But Jim’s friends are all great kids, and they’ve been there for him through a lot,”

Another note and Rose looked up at her “If I’m understanding you right, when Jim is stressed or struggling, he has you, his peers, and your neighbor Nancy to reach out to. Is that correct?”

“Yes that’s correct,”

“Now what about you?”

All Barbara could do was blink back at her “What about me?”

“What do you do when you are stressed or struggling?”

Barbara just sat there, faintly aware of her jaw hanging open.

After a minute of uncomfortable silence she finally found her tongue “I guess for the past ten years…I just handled things myself,”

Even as the sentence left her mouth it sounded weak and feeble.

And you wonder why you had a complete breakdown in front of your son and his friends.

“But I guess I can’t keep doing that,” an uncomfortable laugh tumbled out of her chest.

Rose just kept her eyes on her, gaze devoid of judgment, making Barbara's guts squirm even more.

Stop deflecting, stop trying to gloss things over with a joke. Nothing will get better unless you're honest. You certainly had no trouble being forthright when you were lying on the floor two nights ago, why can't you do it now.

"I guess I…could have reached out, but…" her fingers dug into her legs so hard they hurt "I had heard so much about kids being abused by people the parents let get too close, and if my own family could wound me so badly how could I ever even consider letting a stranger close. Then when James left and everything got so much worse I was so scared of Jim getting hurt or worse that I didn't let anyone get close for years, and I– and I–"

Another soft scratch against the paper–

" *Would you give it a rest with that damn pen!* "

For the first time there was a crack in Rose's unflappable tranquility, jolting in her seat, dark eyebrows arched over wide eyes, hurriedly setting the pen and notebook to the side.

"Of course, I don't need to take notes right down," Rose said, patient and gentle and rubbing Barbara all the wrong ways "We can stop for a minute if you need to, it's ok–"

" *It's not ok!* " Barbara shouted, slamming a fist into the arm of her chair.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't catch enough breath, her chest was heaving but she couldn't get enough air–

"None of this is ok! I thought I was staying on top of everything all this time but everything I did was never enough, and then two nights ago instead of handling it I just broke down. Nancy said she'd take care of the boys for the week while I'm gone, but I don't know if seven days will be long enough to–" she choked, burying her face in her hands "For ten years I thought I was doing what was right, but now I don't know what to do anymore or how to help my son. Everything's– I'm– just so broken and I– I – I don't know how to fix it…"

Her words broke off into a strangled sob, Barbara crumpling in on herself on the chair.

Folding in on yourself and having a breakdown instead of actually dealing with your problems. Again .

A fresh wave of shame smacked into her, all the writhing, gnarled emotions, anger, shame, stress and fear, pressing down on her, leaving her a quivering puddle of tears.

She had no idea how long she stayed like that, sobbing in a heap in her chair, but eventually Rose spoke up, voice soft.

"Barbara if this is too much for you for today we can stop now, but if you're up for it I'd like to ask you a question. This isn't a test, I want to make you think about something,"

Barbara raised her head, blinking at the woman sitting across from her, nodding while dabbing at the corner of her eyes with a tissue, weak sniffles occasionally making their way out of her throat. She wasn't going to waste this entire appointment sitting here sobbing, she

would have plenty of time to do that in her hotel room that was already paid through the week “I…I’m ok, please go ahead,”

“You said that Nancy, your neighbor, is watching your son for a week, to allow you some time for yourself?”

“Yes that’s–” she sniffled deeply to clear her throat “That’s correct,”

“Well what would happen if at the end of the week you didn’t solve all of your problems?”

The question caught her off guard, knocking her back in her chair and momentarily halting the tears, Barbara having to sit and think for a moment to come up with an answer “I…would have to go home, and keep trying to solve my problems alone,”

“Would Nancy stop supporting you?”

“I…what…do you mean?”

“If you didn’t solve all your problems within seven days would Nancy withdraw all her support and leave to solve everything on your own?”

“No, she…she wouldn’t…” Barbara said slowly.

Rose leaned forward, both hands gripping her knees “Barbara you’re an MD, right?”

“Yes, yes I am,”

“Now what would you say to a patient that came in with a badly broken leg who told you that they wanted to be completely healed in seven days?”

Just like that the storm of stress and anxiety inside her popped like a soap bubble, not disappearing entirely, but leaving her mind strangely clear “I’d tell them that broken bones don’t work like that. That we can reset the bone and put a cast on it, but ultimately it’s going to take time to heal,”

“Mental health is a lot like that to,” Rose’s tone was still gentle, but now had an underlying firmness to it “You can do everything right, but there are certain aspects of it that just can’t be hurried,”

“I…never thought about it like that,”

“Furthermore there’s no one ‘right’ way to tackle mental health, and different techniques work better for different people,”

Barbara’s back hit her chair, tension she hadn't even known was there uncoiling from her shoulders, the sensation leaving her feeling dizzyingly light.

“Improving mental health takes time and effort,” Rose leaned back in her own seat “A lot of it is spent figuring out what you want to work on and what mechanisms work best for you, it’s a lot of little steps that build you up into a better place. And realizing that you want to change and making the first steps to do so, those are pretty significant steps,”

Barbara sniffled back the last dregs of her tears and wiped off her glasses on her shirt, allowing her to clearly see the warm smile on Rose's face.

"Right now I'm still getting to know you, and you're still getting to know me. It could be that I'm not the best person to help you. What you need to work on and the best ways to help you do that are all things that we're going to figure out together,"

"You– you're right," she stammered "I'm sorry…"

Rose let out a silvery laugh "Don't apologize, I love it when my clients are this upfront with me. I imagine you feel the same way when a patient comes in and immediately tells you all the pills they swallowed after a night of drinking,"

At the very least Rose's comment would have gotten a smile out of her most days, but today, with her nerves already fraying and rubbed raw, it crossed just the right set of wires to unleash a bout of hysterical, gut busting laughter out of Barbara. She sat there holding her stomach, tears, happy ones this time, running down her face as she laughed and laughed and laughed.

Rose smiled at her before her face abruptly became serious again "Now that being said, another important part of working on your mental health is pacing yourself. To not force yourself to rush through things and allow your emotions to unfold at their own pace. So if you need to stop now, or at any time, just let me know,"

Barbara opened her mouth to say that she was fine to continue, but then stopped herself. She shut her mouth, finished wiping her eyes, and thought, truly thought about it…

There are certain aspects of it that just can't be hurried.

If you didn't solve all your problems within seven days would Nancy withdraw all her support and leave to solve everything on your own?

It's a lot of little steps that build you up into a better place. And realizing that you want to change and making the first steps to do so, those are pretty significant steps.

Thinking about it like a broken bone made it easier.

The task ahead still terrified her, but now it seemed just a little less daunting.

It would take time, and some parts of the process would be painful. But she could heal. Maybe not in seven days, or even seven months. But she could get better. And she wouldn't have to do it alone.

"I…I think I'm ok to continue," Barbara let out a deep breath, bracing herself and settling into the chair "We…might not be able to cover everything today, but I'd like to keep going…"

Chapter End Notes

The therapist's credentials, LPCC, stands for Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor, which is someone with a Masters level of education trained and certified to help people with their mental health. In other states the acronym LPCC stands for Licensed Professional Counselor Candidate, which is someone who can practice under supervision; with the acronym LPC, Licensed Professional Counselor, being used for independent professionals. But in California and a few other states, the LPCC acronym is used for the independent Masters level professionals.

You guys have no idea how much Googling went in to those four

little letters.

Darci

Chapter Summary

Content warning: Implied/referenced racism/colorism.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darci sprinted down the dark street, ignoring the rain pouring down in sheets around her as her shoes slapped against the wet pavement. Even over the rain she could still hear the gate clanging shut behind her, the shouts of alarm that grew steadily fainter as she ran and ran and *ran*.

Forget them, they had *no* right to demand anything from her. Not now. Not after *this*.

Eventually the shouting faded into silence, leaving only the pounding of the rain and the booming of her heart, beating so loud it seemed like it might burst, as she sprinted on into the dark of the early morning. She had no idea how long she ran for, but suddenly out of nowhere the gates of the old cemetery loomed ahead of her, and then vanished behind her as she dashed inside. Running past headstones and mausoleums, the only light coming from the glow of distant streetlights against the polished marble, deeper and deeper into the graveyard until her legs finally gave out, crumpling in a heap on the steps of a large monument with a towering obelisk, panting and quivering on the cold, wet stone.

It was only now she realized she was crying, tears pouring out her eyes and down her cheeks mingling with the rain. Hands shaking and heavy sobs bubbling out of her chest, Darci braced herself against the steps and somehow managed to push herself into a sitting position.

Huddling up against the slick marble; she pulled her knees against her chest, and got out her phone.

The glow of her screen cut sharply through the gloom of the cemetery, raindrops glittering on its surface smeared this way and that as she pulled up her contacts with dripping fingers. Mary went straight to voicemail, which meant her phone was off. Claire rang forever before also going to voicemail, which meant either her phone was on silent or she was asleep.

Either way neither one of them were answering.

Her already burning eyes stung as emotion swelled up Darci's throat.

It had been a long shot from the start, back home in Arcadia it was just after 3am, but she *needed* to talk to someone right now, someone to unload some of this nightmare onto, someone who hadn't lied to her for her entire life–

Wait, there was still one person who might be awake.

She tapped the contact and raised her phone to her ear, holding her breath as it rang.

"Hello?" Jim's voice echoed out of the device from over a thousand miles away.

That was all it took to make the dam break. Darci instantly burst into a fresh wave of tears, bawling and wailing into the phone while huddled on the soggy ground, faintly aware of Jim's voice on the other end of the phone becoming frantic.

“Darci what is it!? Are you ok!? What’s wrong!?”

“I– I– I–” she couldn’t get the words out, throat choked tight with sobs.

“Ok ok ok, if you can’t talk just listen for a second. I want you to try something. Pull in a big breath through your nose for five mississippis, then hold it for five more. Then breathe out for five mississippis and just keep doing that. Can you try that?”

Darci managed to force out something that sounded like an ‘uh huh’ and sucked in a breath through her nose.

The first few times she wasn’t able to get five full mississippi's of breath in, strays sobs leaking through. But as Darci continued the breathing cycles became steadier, and after a few minutes while she was still crying, Darci was able to get herself mostly under control.

“Better?”

“Yeah…” she said with a sniffle.

“Alright, what’s going on? Are you ok?”

“I– I’m fine, physically. I just…I just learned something really bad…”

“What happened?”

“So I woke up really early and came downstairs. My aunt was reading an old newspaper article, I saw my mom’s name in it and she has a really unusual name, Amaryllis, so I knew it had to be her. I asked my aunt what she was reading but then she tried to hide it from me, then my grandparents came downstairs and when they saw what was going on they started acting all weird to, so I grabbed the newspaper and ran and locked myself in the bathroom, and– and– and–”

“Whoa whoa,” Jim cut in “Let’s pause for a bit, I’m not going anywh–”

“My mom didn’t die in an accident,” Darci spat the words like bullets “She was murdered, they never caught the killer and they stopping looking for him a long time ago,”

“….what?”

Darci knew she was rambling now, spiraling further and further into the hysteria that had been building ever since she saw those first words printed in ink, everything coming out in a rush barely coherent “The newspaper didn’t have a lot of details but I looked it up online, she was out driving, then something ran her off the road. When they found the car the door was ripped off its hinges and she was gone, they never found a body, but there was blood, enough that they knew she couldn’t be alive,”

“Oh my god…”

“I– I never knew my mom, and I was always sad that I didn’t, but I thought I was mostly ok with it. I thought she died in an accident, something awful and random that happens to everyone that no one can control. But someone *killed* her, they went after *her* specifically and *killed* her, and they basically got away wi– wi– wi–”

She couldn't continue, words breaking off into sharp gasps, the storm inside her building up bigger and bigger, writhing and frothing into something that couldn't be distilled into words.

"Ok, you're feeling a lot right now, and if you want me to listen to you scream it all out I'm game," Jim's voice echoed out of the phone "But before we get started on that let's try to take a breather for a second. Are you by yourself now?"

"Y– yeah…"

"Are you sitting down?"

"Uh huh,"

"When was the last time you ate or drank something?"

"I…I had dinner last night,"

"Ok you should definitely have some water and something to eat,"

A scowl broke through the turbulence of shock and grief, carving itself on her face as Darci braced her back against the memorial, the puddled rain soaking into her shirt, pulling her free arm around her knees "Well that's gonna be tough because everything's closed and I am *not* going back to my grandma's house,"

"But wh–"

“They *knew*,” she spat “All of them; my aunt, grandma, grandpa, even my dad– they all knew that it wasn’t a car accident that killed my mom. And they all *lied* to me for my entire life!”

“…what?”

“They were quoted in the newspaper,” she grumbled “Each and every one of them knew the truth and lied to me about it for over a decade,”

“Oh…wow…ok, definitely take some space from them until you’re ready,”

I call and tell you my mom was murdered they never found who did it and my family lied to me about it and that’s the best advice you can give me!?

Darci bit her tongue before the venomous words could escape. She was the one who called Jim at three in the morning pacific time to rant, it wasn’t fair to lash out at him for not knowing the perfect thing to say “It’s just….dad always said that we were a team, and he trusted me to make good choices so I needed to trust him to. And it turns out he was keeping this from me this whole time…”

A fresh wave of tears choked her off.

For a few moments nothing but silence emanated from the phone before Jim’s voice crackled out again “Ok, you’re probably feeling a lot right now; angry and sad and really really mad at your dad, and you should feel that stuff for as long as you need to. But I can kind of get where your dad was coming fr–”

"*What!?*"

"Well I just–"

Darci whipped the phone away from her ear to scream into it with full force "*You think it's ok that my dad and the rest of my family lied to me for my entire life!?*"

"No of course not! I just think I can understand–"

Understand.

Understand!?

The last fraying thread of control inside her snapped.

"Don't you *dare* tell me you understand!" Darci gripped the phone with both hands, her voice twisted into an ugly shriek as tears and rainwater streamed down her face "You couldn't possibly understand! Your dad's an asshole! Your mom's still alive and you guys tell each other everything! *And you fucking know that if my mom looked like your mom they would have tried a hell of a lot harder to catch her murderer!* So don't you sit there and tell me that you…you…"

She couldn't speak anymore. Writhing currents of rage and grief sealing her throat shut. Ugly sobs gushing out while she sat there huddled in a ball, soaked to the bone with more rain pouring down, the phone radiating stunned silence.

Jim was probably shocked to hear sweet, sunshiney Darci losing it like this. Well too fucking bad. Her mom was murdered. The killer had gotten away with it. And her family had hid the truth from her for a decade and a half. Darci was *done* being nice.

The silence coming from the phone stretched out so long for a second she wondered if he'd hung up, then Jim's gravely voice picked up again.

"You're…you're right, I don't understand. I have no idea what it's like to grow up without a mom or be lied to like that…and if my mom had gotten hurt people would have treated it differently because of how she looks. That's awful and unfair and messed up and I'm never going to fully understand what that's like, but as far as your dad…."

His voice dropped "I think your dad thought he had everything figured out with you and your mom, then everything changed in an instant. Suddenly your mom was gone and he had a baby he had to take care of all by himself while dealing with questions that he still doesn't have good answers to. Maybe he did some things that he shouldn't have, but I think he probably felt alone and scared and was just trying to do the best he could,"

Just like that her fire was gone, sitting there slumped against the damp stone, smoldering anger eclipsed by a bitter tide of guilt.

She'd never gotten to know her mom, but her dad had *lost* her. He'd had to deal with his wife being murdered while taking care of a baby. Trying to hold everything together while it all fell apart around him.

She was still mad at him for lying, but now she wanted to hug him to.

"Y– you're right….I'm sorry I yelled,"

“No worries, I think you’ve earned a pass right now,”

“It’s just I called you and you were nice enough to try and help me through this even though it’s super early–”

Jim let out a deep laugh “Darci, after the crap you guys have been through dealing with all of my many many big blue issues, I think at the very least you get to yell a little bit after something like this. If anything you’re still in the green, if you want I can set a timer so you can make sure to get all your allotted screaming out,”

Despite how decidedly unfunny both of their situations were, that got a watery laugh out of her.

“So…you doing better? I mean not ‘better’ but–”

“No I get what you mean, I’m not…ok, like at all, and I’m still mad, at everything and at all of them, but….less,”

“Ok, want to talk about it more or want me to distract you?”

Darci stretched her legs out in front of her, soaked clothes resisting the motion and cramped muscles wailing in protest “Distract me please,”

“Got it, distraction distraction….Oh! So at the waterpark opening there was a new surfing simulator ride, we all tried it and wiped out, really bad,”

“How bad?”

“Well…” there was a soft rustle on the other side of the phone, likely Jim sitting down “It spat me out face down, Claire upside down, Mary somehow shot her board out and nearly hit the operator, Toby also ended up upside down but he was the only one who managed to hang onto his board the whole time,”

“Tell me you got that on video,”

“Yep, Mr. Nuñez got the whole thing, plus the guy who went after us who actually did shoot his board out and hit his buddy in the face,”

Darci giggled “Oh man, maybe it’s because I’m soaked down to my underwear, but I can relate,”

“Wait, soaked?”

“It’s raining buckets over here,”

“Rain? Wait…” Jim said slowly “Are you outside right now?”

“Yep, more specifically I’m in a cemetery,”

“What!? Isn’t it still dark where you are!?”

“Yep,” she said with a pop.

“Ok I’m not saying you have to go back home, but you should definitely get out of the graveyard before any ghosts show up,”

Despite the turbulent emotions still roiling inside her and the fact Jim couldn’t see Darci still rolled her eyes “Relax, I’ve been here a bunch of times, it’s just marble and dust and weeds, ghosts don’t exist,”

“…you do realize you’re talking to someone who was *literally* cursed by a magic potion,”

Darci winced “Point taken,”

Ghosts may or may not be a thing, she was feeling so wrung out inside that she honestly didn’t care right now, but she was getting pretty cold. And changing into some dry clothes would be nice. She shakily got to her feet, moving through the pins and needles, and headed towards the entrance, wet socks squelching in her shoes and phone still pressed to her ear “I’m heading back to my grandma’s house now,”

“Are you sure? Because–”

“I’m sure.”

She was still…not happy with her family right now, but the white hot rage from an hour ago had dissipated. And while she wasn’t ready to talk she was ok seeing them and being around them.

“….you want me to stay on the line?” Jim said softly

Unexpected tightness clenched in her chest “Yes please…”

Walking the familiar streets and turns, still recognizable despite the darkness and rain, Jim rambling in her ear about the waterpark, soon her grandparents’ house loomed ahead of her.

“Welp I’m back…time to face the music,”

“You know you don’t have to talk to them if you’re not ready,” Jim said softly “Just say that you need some time by yourself to process for a little bit,”

“…thanks…”

Holding her breath, she pushed in the gate and walked up to the house, stepping onto the porch and out of the rain, for all the good it did now that she was sopping wet through and through. And the humidity really wasn’t doing her any favors.

“Hello?” she peeked her head in the door “I’m back,”

No reply.

While all the lights were on the house was eerily silent, no shifts and creaks that came from human presence. Just Darci standing there dripping on the welcome mat. Confused, she stepped the rest of the way in and pushed the door shut behind her.

“No one’s here,”

“Really?”

She wandered down the hall into the kitchen, perplexed. Sure Azalea probably had to get to work, being a midwife it wasn’t like she could postpone when the baby came, but where did everyone else g–

Oh.

“They…might be out looking for me,”

Jim hissed “Oof, you should probably text them that you’re home,”

“Yeah, just a sec, don’t hang up,” Darci pulled her phone away from her ear, wincing at all the unread text messages she’d received in the last hour, guess her phone was still on silent. Scrolling to the bottom, she sent just one message to her dad, grandma, and aunt.

back home now but need some time before I’m ready to talk

Darci quickly tapped at the screen and put her phone against her ear before she could see any replies.

“Alright, that should keep them from turning the city upside down,”

“That would be ideal, want some more distraction?”

“...would you?” she said softly.

“Anytime, so Toby really wants to try cooking with flambé…”

Darci let Jim’s voice wash over her as she moved towards the stairs and headed up towards her room.

Everything wasn’t ok, not by a long shot. Her mom had been murdered and she was so *so* angry about it. But she wasn’t angry with her dad and her family anymore, not in a way that would last.

Chapter End Notes

> Common writing advice is to not have your characters talk like they're trying to get a good grade in therapy, as it can be unrealistic and immersion breaking. Unless there's a narrative reason for it. Here Jim's currently going to therapy for issues he's had for a long time, so he's repeating words he's heard in therapy when he's in the position of trying to help a friend through their problems. (Important lesson folks, even the best writing advice often has exceptions).
>
> This chapter is important for two reasons. The first and most obvious is setting up foreshadowing and Darci's arc for Between Daylight and Darkness (the next installment), but the second is to show how Jim's friendships aren't just a one way street. While the person who's struggling the most should get the most focus at the moment, relationships in general should be mutually supportive. A friendship that's nothing but one person constantly supporting the other while receiving no support themselves is unhealthy at best and toxic at worst.
>
> In Jim's case for most of the time they've known each other he's had the biggest, most serious problems out of the five of them, so it made sense that he got the bulk of support at that time. But now that Jim's in a better place not only does he not need

constant support, he's capable of giving support and being a rock for Darci when she's struggling.

As far as who killed Darci's mom I think you guys can guess but I'll give some hints. They've made an onscreen appearance, their name starts with B, and their pronouns are he/him.

Barbara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Did you remember to pack extra socks and underwear?”

“Mo-om!” Jim’s face turned lobster red as he descended the stairs to the main floor.

Barbara chuckled as she picked up the cooler, holding Jim’s contribution to the potluck, from the dining room table “Sorry sorry I know I’m hovering,” she fell in step behind him once he reach the floor, the two of them heading out the front door “I just worry about you,”

And she was worried.

It wasn’t like this came out of nowhere, she’d known for over a month this was coming. But the summer had flown by, June and the first chunk of July passing in a flurry of therapy appointments carpools and outings and texts with other parents. And now here they were, Bon Voyage only minutes away.

The two of them headed down the porch, Barbara’s throat tightening when she saw the van idling by the curb. She was so *so* worried about Jim going through with this. But she knew that most of her worries were anchored in her own paranoia rather than reality.

This was perfectly safe, they had a plan in place and Jim was a responsible young man who could take care of himself.

That didn't make it any easier to let him go.

"I promise it'll all go ok," Jim hefted his bag higher over his shoulder "We've got a game plan, and I packed four pairs of underwear,"

He flashed her a reassuring smile, making her heart clench in a way that both stung and relieved "I know I know, now let's not keep Mary's moms waiting,"

The two of them approached the van. Darci's grinning head poking out an open window "About time, we were considering leaving without you,"

"No don't!" Toby's voice rang out from inside the car "He needs to come with us so I can smoke him at horseshoes!"

Barbara left the kids to it and stepped towards the driver's window, nodding at the two women in the front seat "Julie, Amy, good to see you,".

"Barbara, good to see you to," Julie repiled with her own nod "You need a hand?"

"Nope I've got it," Barabra stepped around to the back of the car, popping the trunk with her foot and sliding the cooler inside before shutting it again. Around the side of the car Jim had already placed his overnight bag inside and was about to step in himself.

A surge of emotion overcame her and before she knew what she was doing Barbara darted towards him and snagged Jim in a tight hug.

“Love you kiddo, have fun and stay safe,”

Jim was stiff for a few seconds before he softened into her embrace, returning her hug with one of his own “Love you to mom, I promise I’ll be fine,”

Her heart swelled, Jim nestled snug against her. In that moment Barbara wanted more than anything to hold Jim close and never let him go.

But she let him go, stepping back onto the sidewalk while Jim climbed inside the van. Flashing one final smile towards her before shutting the door. Less than a second later the van pulled away from the curb. Through the open window she could see Jim waving at her as they went.

Barbara tugged her lips up into what she hoped resembled a grin, giving a jerky wave back.

Then the van rounded the corner past a grove of trees, both it and Jim vanishing from sight.

Now it was just Barbara, standing all alone on the side of the road.

Jim was gone, heading the furthest he’d ever been from her reach, and he wouldn’t be coming back for two days.

Stomach going tight and eyes starting to water, Barbara forced herself to pick up her feet and move back towards the house.

This was perfectly safe, Jim was a teenager, a smart mature responsible teenager, he could look after himself.

He wouldn't be alone, he'd have his friends, and responsible adult supervision.

This was fine. This was *necessary* . She and Jim needed to learn how to function separately from each other.

But god was it hard.

Jim was far away and if anything changed or something happened and he needed help she wouldn't be there and she was so *so* worried.

Barbara stepped through the front door, shutting it behind her and leaning back against the wood. Closing her eyes and pulling in a deep breath.

And that was ok.

She was worried about Jim, and that was ok. It didn't make her smothering or overbearing or paranoid. It was ok to worry about her son while he was away on an overnight trip. Now what was she going to do with that worry?

Realistically if something did happen she would get a call from Jim or one of his friends or another adult. She should keep her phone fully charged and on her person at all times in case of an emergency, and unless something did happen that was all she could do. But she

shouldn't just sit and stare at the phone all day waiting for it to ring, that would change nothing and help no one.

Fortunately she'd planned ahead on a distraction.

Pushing off the door and striding into the kitchen, Barbara grabbed the spiral notebook and pen off the counter and the totebags off the floor before heading back outside.

Running errands, and not just the grocery store.

First she'd run by the hardware store to pick up spare home repair supplies, then hit the department store for new clothes and sheets, and finally the grocery store to stock up.

With all Barbara had planned she should well and truly be able to distract herself from Jim's absence for the rest of the day. Of course after she was done….

Well by then enough time should have passed to take the edge off.

Despite these rationalizations, Barbara still felt dark clouds lurking at the edge of her thoughts as she hopped inside the car, tossing her items onto the passenger seat. Visions of all the ways Jim's little trip could go horribly wrong. Fighting the knee-jerk urge to shove the thoughts away, Barbara tried to address them as she pulled out onto the street.

His secret being exposed, his friends would cover for him.

A medical emergency, those were just as likely to happen here.

Mauled by a bear…well the bear might actually lose.

The thoughts acknowledged, Barbara now tried to let them flow away. It wasn't easy but she was getting better. Like Rose said, there was a big difference between acknowledging and working herself into a lather.

Jim was gone on a two day trip. He was as safe as reasonably possible but she was still worried. And that was ok. Learning to cope with her worries was an important step for both of them. It was still so *so* hard, but that was ok to.

Barbara found herself saying that a lot lately.

It had been a month and a half yet somehow felt like it happened both yesterday and centuries ago. A month and a half since James had blown everything she thought she knew out of the water, since she'd started seeing Rose, since her entire way of living for over a decade had been flipped on its head. Leaving her adrift in uncharted waters, unsure of where she was headed or what currents would pull her.

A month and a half and Barbara still hadn't quite found her bearings.

The blue and white Lowes sign came into view as she pulled into the parking lot. Barbara parked at the far end, the walk would be good for her, and grabbed her notebook.

Alright, time to get out of her own head and be productive.

She hopped out of the car and strode into the store.

And her time in the store was very productive. She bought spare light bulbs, nails, and screws. Looked at the fridge and freezer units, they didn't actively need one right now but it couldn't hurt to get some ideas for the future, and had a lovely conversation with a man in the PPE section.

His name was Mike, he was from Milwaukee and he was here for his son's graduation from engineering school in Los Angeles.

So when Barbara got back in the car she checked her phone, finding no new messages from Jim or the others, and she was pleased to see the better part of two hours had gone by, and she was still more or less put together.

Next stop, Macys.

Macys proved to be much more hectic than Lowes, because apparently July was an appropriate time to start a back to school sale, but despite the crowds Barbara still managed to get everything she came for and a few sale items.

In fact the trip was so busy that it wasn't until she got back to the car that Barbara realized she hadn't thought about Jim once during her rush for sheets and sale price t-shirts.

And after checking her phone, seeing no new messages or texts, she realized she didn't feel bad about that.

Barbara felt not good, but better than she thought she would as she pushed her cart down the aisle at the grocery store. Jim had gone away for the weekend, and while he wouldn't be back for a while, so far the sky hadn't fallen, no catastrophe had happened, and no one had called her with bad news. Barbara had been trying to convince herself all day that this was going to be fine, but only now was she really starting to believe tha–

Her cart rounded the corner and her good mood crashing down to the ground and her heart shooting straight up into her throat.

She hadn't seen him since that awful night, so much time had passed she'd been starting to hope that he'd left town of his own volition, but here he was. Blinking back at her from across the soup aisle.

His nose had a crooked hunch to it that hadn't been there before, he'd likely never gotten it properly set after it had been broken, but the man in front of her was still unmistakably James.

For the longest time neither one of them said anything, just staring at each other with the creaking of other shoppers' carts and the store's radio droning around them.

James was gaping, his mouth flapping open and shut like a fish before he finally managed to get words out.

"Barb I…I'm sorry,"

That broke the spell, shattering the bubble that had formed around her mind and letting rationality crash back in.

Seeing him again brought up a whole storm of conflicting emotions, one that she was nowhere near prepared to untangle. But through all the chaos in her mind one thought was clear.

She didn't want this man anywhere near herself or her child ever again.

Barbara pulled her cart back, turned on her heel, and immediately started walking the opposite direction. From behind she heard James' shoes slapping against the linoleum as he struggled to catch up.

"Didn't you hear me? I'm sorry."

"That's nice." Barbara said, please at how sharp and clipped her tone came out, rounding her cart around the edge of the aisle.

"I messed up bad and let you and Jim down, and I'm ready to do whatever it takes to make it up,"

"Good for you."

This time she heard a falter in his steps, stopping for a few moments before continuing on after her "Look Barb, ever since I left, things have been hard,"

He darted around to the front of her cart, blocking her path and causing her to halt in her tracks "Will's bar didn't work out, for the past five years I've been working odd jobs and living paycheck to paycheck. And Heather….Heather cheated on me,"

Another step towards her “I need help getting back on my feet, if you could find it in your heart to just let me stay with you for a few months, six tops, I promise I’ll be there for you the way I should have been all this time,”

Barbara narrowed her eyes, staring at him for a few more seconds before steering the cart around him, walking further down the aisle, exiting it for one of the main corridors of the store. James still following on her heels.

“Barb look I’m pouring my soul out here,” a petulant edge crept into his voice “I’ve already apologized, what more do you want me to do?”

She didn’t slow down, or even turn her head “Go to Vegas, become a millionaire, or go to Hollywood and become an actor. Quite frankly I don’t care what you do, but there is no place for you with me or in my family,”

An abrupt shuffle and a rustle and suddenly James was kneeling on the floor in front of her cart, several other shoppers stopping and staring at the sight.

“Barb I…I fucked up real bad, there’s no way around that. But these past ten years have been so hard. It took me all that just to realize how much you and Jim mean to me. And I’m willing to do whatever it takes to earn your forgiveness,”

No one moved, all the other shoppers staring at him in stunned silence, while James looked up at her, expression pleading.

For a moment Barbara was so taken aback all she could do was stare, mouth agape.

Then his laughter, cruel and mocking, from when he'd learned exactly what he'd done to Jim echoed in her mind and all shock vanished. Replaced with searing rage.

Barbara glared down at him, feeling her lips pull up into a snarl, cold fire smoldering in her chest.

"James let me make this clear. I don't *care* about anything you have to say because your actions have proven that you don't care about Jim and I," her voice was icy and diamond hard "Whether or not you're sorry is irrelevant, you've burned every bridge between us. And how dare you try to manipulate me by causing a scene in public."

James flinched back at that, kneeling there on the floor face twisted up in a wince. Someone in the small crowd around them coughed.

"Dude, just get up,"

Not wasting a second, Barbara strode past James and pushed her cart to the front. She paid for and bagged her groceries without incident, all of them fitting in a single tote bag over her shoulder. For a moment she'd started to believe that she'd evaded James for good, but just when she was heading out the doors James darted in front of her again.

"Look Barbara I don't want to do this, but if you don't give me a hand I'll take custody of Jim,"

Hearty laughter burst out of her, drawing stares from the other shoppers and employees around them entering and exiting the store "You're going to try for custody after ten years of no contact and zero

child support? Please do, let me know how that turns out,”

For a few moments James just stared at her, blinking in surprise, then the pleading look dropped off of his face in an instant, something dark taking its place “Don’t laugh Barb, I know your biggest secret. Now either you help me out or I’ll expose Little Jimmy’s ‘condition’ to the whole world,”

That threat sent a bolt of fear through her, heartbeat stuttering, but she dared not show it “You sure about that?” Barbara kept her shoulders square and voice steady, looking him dead in the eye and trying to project a confidence she didn’t feel “Because you have no proof and I’ve got five witnesses willing to say that Jim’s an average teenage boy. Not to mention with the trespassing and assault charges against you I don’t think anyone in Arcadia’s going to be inclined to believe you,”

James’ face darkened further, expression stony and all traces of remorse gone.

Or maybe they’d never been there in the first place. Maybe she was seeing James’ real face for the first time.

“You’re going to regret screwing me like this Barb,”

The cold certainty in his words chilled her to the bone, having to fight to maintain her poker face as she stepped around him and walked out the door “You did this to yourself James,”

Barbar headed out to her car, constantly glancing back to make sure James wasn’t following. Tossing her bag in the backseat before getting in herself and locking all the doors.

Then promptly burst into tears, fumbling for her phone with badly shaking hands. Somehow managing to pull up her contacts and bring it to her ear.

“Hello Rose?”

Barbara stepped through the front door, setting the last of her bags down on the floor while it swung shut behind her. She trudged over to the recliner and collapsed down in it, letting out a gusty breath. Today had been exhausting, in more ways than one, but at least it was over.

Sunlight streamed in through the windows, blinds open since Jim was on his trip, it set later this time of year. Nearly six o clock and it was still bright out. And it was just about time for…

Her phone chimed to life, Barbara fumbling to answer it, tapping the screen and holding it close to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Hey mom,” Jim’s voice rang out

“Hi kiddo,” she replied, a soft grin spreading across her face

And just like that, hearing her son’s voice so bright and happy, all the stress and anxiety of the day melted away “It’s good to hear from you.

How's your party going?"

"Great!" Jim said with a deep laugh. Too deep…

"Wait Jim have you…changed already?"

"Yup, about fifteen minutes ago,"

Despite herself she shot forward in her seat "But it's so early?"

"Up in the mountains the sun sets earlier I guess, but it's fine. I'm out in the woods, tent's all set up for the night, but the gang and I are going to meet up later for snacks and scary stories. Well they'll have snacks, I'll have the wrappers the snacks came in,"

A soft laugh escaped "I'm…I'm glad you're having a good time,"

She was, she really really was. She was glad her worries were for nothing and everything was going ok and Jim was having a fun time without her.

But she'd be lying if she said it didn't sting a little. Jim, her little boy, had outgrown her. Jim was off on his own and doing just fine without her.

Which was good. He was fifteen, it was only natural for him to be more or less independent. But knowing how right this was didn't do anything to stop her from feeling left in the lurch.

“Yeah….hey mom?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for letting me come on this trip…I know it’s a big change,”

From out of nowhere a crippling ache struck through her chest, burning surging up behind her eyes “Of course sweetie,” Barbara was careful to not let the sudden wave of emotion color her words “I want you to have a good time with your friends,”

“It’s just, for so long thinking about the future, what I do with all this…it scared me, I didn’t think that there was any way I could be happy. But now when I think about what comes next and everything we’re going to do together, for the the first time ever I’m excited about it,”

Her glasses fogged “That’s great hon,”

“I mean…for years I thought I was trapped, with the way I was stuck in the house, but I guess in the end I wasn’t nearly as trapped as I thought I was. Does that make sense?”

“Y– yes, yes it does,” she tried but wasn’t quite able to keep the tremor out of her voice.

“Thanks mom, I hope you’re having a good time to,”

“You know it, alright I don’t want to keep you from your candy wrappers,” that was a lie, she could talk to Jim for hours, but the longer she stayed on the line the greater the risk of him hearing her cry “I’ll talk to you later kiddo,”

“Ok, bye mom, love you,”

“Bye sweetie, Love you to,”

A tap of the screen and she was alone again. For a few minutes she stayed where she was sitting back in the chair, blinking away the remains of tears with Jim’s words echoing in her skull, observing the empty house in a whole new light.

Jim wasn’t a little boy, he didn’t need her the way he did when he was five. That was good for him, he was old enough he should be independent and living his own life. At first she’d felt left behind, but maybe this was a good thing for her to.

Barbara didn’t have a young child with complex needs that had to be figured out as they went along. Her child was a teenager now; confident, self reliant, and had a rich social life with friends his age. He didn’t *need* her–

For the first time instead of bringing pain that thought made her feel so dizzyingly light.

She could get in the car right now, drive to Arcadia National park, paint the sunset, and drive back at midnight while hitting every roadside attraction on the way. And Jim would still be A-ok hanging out with his friends at their party. Right now Barbara could do *anything* she wanted and Jim would still be fine, the whole world seemed to be opening up to her. She could explore museums, pick up

old hobbies, paint the town red with her fr–

Before she realized what she was doing Barbara was lifting up her phone again and pulling up her contacts, raising it to her ear as it rang. Only three rings and the other person picked up.

“Hello?” Nancy’s voice echoed out.

“Hi Nancy it’s Barbara, I was just wondering…” she trailed off, suddenly unsure.

“Wondering what?”

“I guess, I mean…it’s still early tonight,” Barbara stammered “And I was wondering if you wanted to go out and…I don’t know, maybe do something like hit up a restaurant or–”

“Count me in!”

“Are you sure? I mean I don’t want to interrupt your evening–”

“Barbara reruns of Mistrial and Error are still going to be here tomorrow. Now you get your car started while I head over, we’re hitting the town!”

A smile tugging at the edges of her mouth and excitement she hadn’t felt in years bubbling up in her chest, Barbara stood and all but ran towards the door.

Chapter End Notes

Barbara still struggles with a lot, and probably always will. But with professional help and personal support she is doing so much better now.

As you've all noticed by the count there's only one chapter left in this story, which I should get up in December, then we're on the the next installment which I should start posting next Spring.

And now at long last the real reason James came back to town comes to light. He never cared about Barbara or Jim, his been just barely scraping by for a while, and when he heard CPS was looking into them he thought he could leverage that situation into getting free room and board out of them.

After the events of this chapter James doesn't try to reveal Jim's troll form, with the fantastical nature of his claims and Barbara and the other kids vouching for Jim no one would believe James, and James knows it. Not to mention with the stunts he pulled at the school and the bookstore James' credibility in the community is completely shot, he ends up running away to Los Angeles with his tail between his legs.

Now that James the Lame is out of his mind for good, in the next installment Jim's going to be getting a whole flock of new dads. Without spoilers, Jim's flock of dads will include a former trained killer, two current trained killers, and one troll with four arms, six eyes, and zero impulse control named Blinkous Galadrigal (ok maybe a little spoilers).

James really is his own worst enemy, after learning about Jim's troll form, it would have been so easy to use that information as leverage and manipulate Barbara into giving him what he wanted. But he just couldn't resist having a gotcha moment with Barbara and revealing his true colors. And it's because of his own actions in the community he ends up having to skip town entirely. James may be a villain, but he's no master manipulator, he's an entitled, petty, short-sighted idiot.

But this is exactly what makes him so dangerous.

He may have been forced to leave Arcadia due to his own actions, but James doesn't see it that way. The whole time he's trying to scrape by in LA he's grumbling and blaming Barbara for everything, always wanting a chance to get revenge on her. And

James might not care about Jim at all, but he has zero qualms about hurting him to get to Barbara. Because James is so short-sighted he doesn't think about the long term consequences of his actions. So even consciously knowing that any actions he takes against Jim will result in him getting trampled to death by no fewer than five trolls won't stop him.

The good news is while James still believes he can't get to Barbara and Jim he'll leave them alone, but if something catastrophic happens, say a massive freak tornado in the middle of a city, James just might try to sneak back to get his revenge.

So James is gone, but he will return after the eternal night, with the intent to destroy everything Barbara holds dear, starting with her beloved son.

Jim

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim leaned back and stretched against the bike rack just outside the front of the school, basking in the early morning sunlight. He'd gotten here super early, it was a full half hour until classes started, but he was in no rush. Content to enjoy the gold and peach light of the rising sun and the peaceful quiet while he waited for the others.

Twenty minutes later he heard the clicking of a bike approaching, turning to see Toby pedaling up to him.

"It is *not* fair how you can get up so obscenely early," Toby huffed, dragging his bike to the rack and locking it in next to Jim's.

Jim just chuckled "Hey we all have our strengths, but I know what will ease the pain," he patted the white box sitting on top of the rack next to him.

Toby's eyes widened "What i–"

"What *is* that?" Darci sped up to them on her own bike, eyes sparkling.

Jim just gave her an easy smile "You'll have to wait until Mary and Claire get here,"

"Well that could take–"

“I– I’m here,” Mary pulled her own bike up, panting.

Toby raised an eyebrow “What’s with the wheels, I thought your Mo dropped you off in the mornings?”

Mary scowled “My moms caught me sneaking out to go on a date with Mallory, now I have to bike to school for two weeks,”

“Bummer,”

Behind them Jim saw a familiar car pull up against the curb and pushed himself all the way upright “Looks like Claire’s here to,”

A station wagon with a bright yellow ‘Baby on Board’ decal came to a stop by the edge of the curb, the side door popping open and Claire hopping out and moving towards them.

“Hey guys,” Claire said with a wide smile “Ready for the first day of sophomore year?”

“Technically we had our first five days last week,”

Mary snorted “Orientation and whatever the heck ‘Mole Spirit Week’ is don’t count,”

“Sounds like someone lost their school spirit,” Darci said in a sing-song voice.

Toby nodded sagely “Oh she definitely needs a school spirit transplant,”

That earned the two of them a groan from Mary.

Claire rolled her eyes at their antics, gaze landing on the white box “Hey Jim, what’s with the box?”

He grinned back at her, reaching over and picking up the box “Glad you asked. Since I was able to get an early start today, and mom gave me some cash for snacks, I decided to grab us a treat, celebrate the start of the school year and all,” he held the box out and opened it up, revealing five giant cinnamon rolls, oozing with gooey filling topped with generous dollops of frosting, four sets of eyes simultaneously widened.

Toby’s jaw dropped “Are these from that fancy bakery that opened last week!? How!? They sell out almost instantly and preorders are backed up weeks,”

“I got up at the crack of dawn, took the long way around town to school, and stopped by just as they were opening,”

“So *that’s* why I didn’t spot you at the canal,”

“Ok clearly adding you to our friend group was a good choice,” Mary said, eyes locked on the open box, slowly edging closer.

“Glad to hear it,” Jim held the box out further “Go nuts guys I didn’t

bring them here to look at,”

They took his advice, whipping their hands into the box and tearing into the cinnamon rolls. Soon the five of them settled back, leaning against the wall and bike rack, each munching on their own roll.

Claire finished hers first, sucking her fingers clean of frosting before speaking up “So…the drama department is doing Romeo and Juliet this year, I was thinking we should all try out, that way we could all work on the play together,”

She pulled out a flier which they immediately started passing around, all of them murmuring curiosity, Jim included. But when it came to him and he spotted the times he could actually feel the fluttering hope in his stomach sputter and die.

“Sorry but I won’t be able to be in the play. It runs too late and I have to get home early because of…you know,”

“But rehearsals end way before– that, so it shouldn’t be an issue,”

Jim forced back a wince as he handed the flier back to Claire “Yeah for now, but as the season goes on, daylight savings and all, it’s going to start happening later,”

Claire blinked at him, eyes going wide “Oh…sorry,”

“Here’s a thought,” Mary cut in “Maybe you wouldn’t be able to act, but if Ms. Janeth is ok with it you can be a stagehand and just duck out before it starts getting dark,”

“That…sounds like it could work,” Jim felt a soft smile slowly spread across his face.

It wouldn’t be the same, not exactly, but they could all still work on the play and have fun together.

“I’ll talk to Mrs. J,” Toby said, siding up to Jim and flashing a grin “I’ll give her the ol’ Domzalski charm,”

Mary fixed him with a look “Toby we *talked* about this,”

Darci just rolled her eyes “How about we all talk to Ms. Janeth during tryouts on Thursday, strength in numbers and all,”

“That sounds good,” Claire added

Jim found himself nodding along “Works for me,”

“ *And* I can give her the Domzalski charm,”

Jim laughed as Mary, Darci, and Claire simultaneously groaned, the giddy energy staying with him even as they broke apart and drifted towards their lockers. He was halfway through spinning the combination into his locker when it hit him.

It was this exact day last year when *it* happened.

The thought startled him so much for a moment he just stood there in front of his wide open locker with the door swinging in the air.

Getting hit with so much sadness and despair that he couldn't handle it. Completely breaking down crying under the weight of the hopelessness to the point where he thought he'd never be happy again. Even though he knew it was a year to the day it felt like it happened just yesterday and a thousand years ago.

Jim still could very clearly remember just how utterly crushed he'd been, he didn't think he could ever forget that. But after everything he'd been through over the last year all that misery felt so far away.

A year ago he'd thought his life was over, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Things had been hard over the last year, incredibly so, but he'd gained three new friends, learned so much, took back his life and made it his own.

Thinking about what would happen after high school still scared him a little, but now it also thrilled him.

There was a lot of uncertainty ahead. He still didn't know what it was he turned into, he might never know. What changes he might go through as an adult. Facing the struggles of college and jobs.

But whatever was ahead of him he wouldn't have to face it alone.

A gently warmth blooming in his chest, Jim reached out and grabbed his locker door, halting its swinging

Maybe bad things would still happen, as he got bigger he might have to eat more and more meat to survive, his dad might come back and stir up trouble again, more people might get close to his secret; but no matter what happened he had friends and family to help him through it. He didn't have to face the unknown all alone.

And bad things might happen, but maybe good things would happen to.

For the first time in he didn't even remember how long, Jim could think about the future with a smile on his face.

He was still grinning like an idiot, practically dizzy with giddiness, as he tossed his bag into his locker, which was why he only caught the tail end of Eli's ramble.

"--monsters with stone for skin!"

Jim jerked violently, heart yanking up and down, locker door slipping from his hand during his panicked flailing. Reaching out with shaky hands to slam it shut with much more force than needed. Leaning against the locker with both hands, trembling against the metal, Jim slowly turned around, desperately hoping he hadn't just heard what he thought he had.

Eli was standing in the corner speaking rapidly and making large sweeping gestures with his arms as he talked, gathered around him were some wide-eyed freshmen and a few unimpressed looking upperclassmen. Jim shoved down the sudden spike of anxiety, if nothing else he'd gotten good at doing that over the last year, forcing himself to act casual as he walked over towards him.

“What was that you were saying Eli?”

Eli looked up sharply at him, a wild glint in his eyes “On my way to school this morning I saw two monsters with stone for skin fighting under the canal bridge!”

One of the others, Seamus, he now recognized, gave a sharp bark of laughter “Get real E-lame, if you’re going to make stuff up at least be creative about it,”

Jim didn’t allow himself to so much as twitch, but on the inside he was practically melting with relief. He hadn’t left the house before he’d changed, and he hadn’t been anywhere near the canal this morning. No way Eli spotted him while he was blue. Chances are Eli just saw something else from a distance and got confused.

“I’m not lying!” Eli’s voice was shrill, nearly a shout “There are monsters in Arcadia living right under our noses!”

“I don’t think you're lying Eli–”

Eli spun towards him, face practically radiant with gratitude, making the next part hard to say.

“But don’t you think it’s more likely you just saw some guys in motorcycle gear duking it out than actual monsters?”

“I know what I saw, it was monsters!”

Seamus scowled and opened his mouth to no doubt say something else scathing, but before he could get a word out first bell rung, scattering the loose gathering as they all headed for their classes.

Eli was harmless. Whatever he'd spotted this morning wasn't Jim, and it wasn't like any of his conspiracy junk had ever held water before.

Nevertheless Jim was still on edge when he sat down in Mr. Strickler's class for first period just before second bell run.

"Alright students quiet down," Mr. Strickler strode to the front of the room, hands folded behind his back as the room settled into silence "I know the Punic wars might not seem like the most exciting conflict in history, but that's just for those who don't know better…."

Jim pulled out his notebook and started quickly scribbling down notes, doing his best to force Eli's talk of monsters out of his head and focus on the lesson Strickler was–

James Lake

His heart shot up into his throat, jerking in his seat and snapping upright, pencil dragging a sharp line across his paper yanking his notebook to the side.

"Dude you ok?" Toby whispered from the seat next to him.

Jim's eyes flickered towards the front of the room where Strickler was still talking about the Punic wars while pointing at different parts of his projection while all eyes in the room were on him.

No interruption in the lecture. No one looking his way.

“Did…you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“It’s– never mind,”

Toby raised an eyebrow but turned back towards the front of the room. Jim shook his head and discreetly pulled in a deep breath. He must have imagined it, no need to freak out five minutes in to his first class.

He regripped his pencil and straightened his notebook just as Mr. Strickler turned around to face the room again.

“Now pay attention because this will be on your first test…”

Heartbeat slowing, Jim lowered his gaze towards his paper and went back to jotting down–

James Lake

He somehow managed to keep himself from jerking again, pencil in an iron grip and a slow shudder creeping up his body. Something slimy curling in his belly, Jim looked up again and discreetly looked around the room.

There was no way that it was Mr. Strickler saying his name, and it didn't look like anyone else in the room was calling him either. Was his mind just playing tricks on hi–

James Lake

His heart dropped down into the pit of his stomach, pencil tumbling from his grip.

Nope. Not imagining it. There was an actual voice in his head.

"Is there a problem Jim?" Mr. Strickler's cool voice cut through his mounting panic.

Jim looked up at him–

James Lake

Mr. Strickler and everyone else in the room didn't so much as flinch.

Yep it was only him. Jim was hearing a voice calling his name that no one else could. That wasn't good. At all.

"I…uh…have to go to the bathroom,"

One of Mr. Strickler's eyebrows quirked up "Class just started,"

James Lake

“I really *really* have to go,”

Snickers and giggles filled the room.

“Alright then, just hurry back,”

Jim managed to give a frantic nod of thanks as he practically raced out of the room, Feeling Toby and the girls’ eyes on him as he went.

In some part of his mind he knew it was bad he was having another big moment of public weirdness on the first day of school after the one he’d had last year. But the bigger part of him was focused on the literal *voice in his head* . He managed to make it to the end of the hall before it hit him again, much louder than it had been in the classroom.

JAMES LAKE

Ok, mysterious voice was getting louder. But was the volume increasing or was Jim getting…closer? Only one way to find out and he literally had no other ideas.

Moving through the school, the voice getting steadily louder as he went, Jim found himself standing in an open side door without even realizing it, staring at the open street ahead of him. For a moment he hesitated, imagining all the trouble he’d be in if he was caught ditching–

JAMES LAKE

Jim gritted his teeth and took off sprinting down the sidewalk. Running and running guided only by the voice in his head.

JAMES LAKE

Leaving pavement behind he raced down a dirt trail towards the canal. Slowing but not stopping when he reached the edge. Scrambling down the concrete he slipped and tumbled, landing hard on his hands and knees on the concrete. For a moment he stayed like that, palms stinging and knees throbbing, kneeling on the ground, panting.

JAMES LAKE

He froze.

That time the voice hadn't been in his head.

Slowly lifting his head up. Jim spotted a pile of gravel underneath the bridge, in the same direction that the voice had come from. He pushed himself upright, taking small, cautious steps towards the bridge.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

No reply, either from inside and outside his head. The only sound the

distant rumble of traffic on the road above. Stopping right in front of the pile, Jim saw that what he thought was gravel was actually some very coarse rubble. Seeing nothing else but bare concrete around him, Jim got down on his knees and started sifting through it, not even sure what he was looking for.

Until he touched something that wasn't rock.

Jim froze for a second before he closed his fingers around the object, cool and smooth in his hands, and pulled it out.

When he saw it he was so stunned he couldn't move, kneeling in the bright canal marveling at the bizarre object in his hands.

The closest comparison he could make was to a pocket watch, but this was like no pocket watch he'd ever seen.

It was about the size of his phone, round, made of a shiny silver metal surrounding a sky blue face. There were hands and writing on it, but not in any orientation or language he'd ever seen, fixed together with gears sporting gargoyle-like faces in an incomprehensible jumble.

While Jim was still struggling to figure out what exactly he was looking at, the voice came again, emanating directly from the pocket watch, but softer, and almost…comforting.

James Lake

Then there was a sound almost like a sigh of relief and the pocket watch went silent.

Jim's breath caught in his throat. For a few moments he could only stare at the object, then he slowly raised it to his ear

"Uh…hello? Anyone home?"

Nothing but silence. The voice was gone, and somehow Jim had a feeling it wouldn't be back because it had done what it was supposed to.

But that still left him with far more questions than answers.

Adrenaline slowly draining away, Jim stood back up straight and turned the object over in his hands, trying to spot any other markings or clues that could give more insight.

As he examined the not-pocket watch he was hit by a sudden wave of awareness. Jim was standing in the canal in broad daylight talking to an inanimate object. If anyone going by saw him they would report him for truancy, or worse call his mom.

Mysterious voices and pocket watches aside he needed to get back to class.

Jim shook himself off, sliding the pocket watch into the back pocket of his jeans before making his way back up the side of the canal.

Despite the craziness that was his life, mysterious talking watches was a new one. What *was* this thing? Why did it call his name? What did it all mean?

Jim let out a breath as he planted both feet on the dirt bordering the canal, turning and heading back in the direction of the sidewalk that led to the school. Feeling the constant press of the object’s shape and weight in his pocket.

Well whatever this was, he wouldn’t have to tackle it alone, he’d have his friends to help him figure it out.

Chapter End Notes

> When I first started this story four years ago I wasn't sure how for it would go. I wasn't even sure I'd finish it. Now we're at the final chapter and I've got the next installment planned to release next April.
>
> I just want to say thank you to everyone who enjoyed this story and took the time to leave kudos and comments. Seeing other people enjoying the work I post has never failed to be a bright spot in my life even through some very turbulent times in my life. I appreciate each and hope you enjoyed reading this story just as much as I enjoyed writing it.
>
> Happy reading! See you in next Spring with the final installment of this series, Between Daylight and Darkness.

Works inspired by this one

Of Monsters by HekateTheAceWitch

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!